

**Segmenting the Thin Blue Line:
An Ethnographic Content Analysis of Myth and Ritual in
Contemporary U.S. Police Film**

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ABSTRACT

The continued ills of mass incarceration, combined with the more recent rash of police-caused killings of people of color, make it clear that the U.S. criminal justice system is experiencing a period of profound crisis related to policing. This dissertation aims to interrogate the cultural ideologies supporting the existing policing enterprise in the U.S. To do this, the study first examines the foundational myths that shape prevailing cultural perceptions of the police and their social role. Ethnographic content analysis methodology is then utilized to identify both the presence and the subversion of these myths and their attendant rituals in a purposive sample of 20 21st century U.S. police films. Finally, the ideological work performed by these myths and rituals in reference to state power is explored. As discussed in this dissertation, the central myth surrounding policing is the thin blue line myth, which casts police in the role of warriors who must take violent action to defend their territory against savagery and chaos. Three derivative myths that serve as its components are the myth of good and evil—which portrays police and policing as fundamentally good and justice-involved people as fundamentally evil, the myth of the beleaguered professional—which portrays policing as a highly dangerous and difficult job and cops as always victorious nonetheless, and the myth of us versus them—which portrays police, “conventional” people, and justice-involved people as three strictly separate and opposed groups in society. The logics of these myths and their attendant rituals are portrayed frequently in the study’s sample of films, ultimately reinforcing the harmful ideas of thin blue line mythology. However, these logics are also subverted in unique ways that suggest new, less oppressive ways of thinking about policing. Through critical analysis of popular cultural forms, this research uncovers the oppressive mechanisms of state power within the type of filmic representation that is often taken for granted, and it identifies potential avenues of resistance. Moreover, by incorporating the concepts of myth and ritual, which provide unique analytic insights into ideology, this dissertation contributes to undertheorized areas of criminological literature.

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“If law enforcement could be treated as a useful emotional value which had only a limited application, like Santa Claus or football in college—if only we did not feel we had to mold our entire system to be consistent with it... However, it is so important to our institutions that it cannot be so treated. Its universal application must never be denied in public. Therefore the ceremonies which attend its observance, and which conceal the escapes from its implications, become very elaborate indeed.”

— Thurman Arnold, *The Symbols of Government*

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Once a week, every week, for all 29 years of my life, I have reserved approximately 60 minutes of my day to sit, stand, and kneel in a large, ornate room filled with incense. During these hour-long periods, I wear special, formal clothing, listen to retellings of familiar stories, and repeat sequences of meaningful words and gestures. This weekly practice is the Mass, the central religious activity in the life of the practicing Roman Catholic. Over the course of my life, my relationship with the Catholic Mass has changed dramatically in ways that mirror my shifting sentiments towards God. I first experienced childhood incomprehension followed by adolescent boredom; I have since settled into a nuanced state of adult ambivalence, one characterized neither by uncomplicated adoration nor utter lack of need.

The negative side of my spiritual ambivalence is related to the numerous trials, both personal and institutional, that members of any organized religion must reckon with. On numerous occasions, these trials have impelled me to ask myself what is keeping me in the Church. It is a complex question with many answers, but one I continually return to is the sheer power of the myths and rituals I have encountered in my spiritual life as a Catholic.

The myths of the Church are its sacred stories, dogmas, and doctrines, like the parable of the prodigal son or the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The rituals are the concrete, bodily practices that its followers act out, such as joining hands

with others during communal prayer or touching water to one's forehead, chest, and shoulders in the shape of a cross. The Church's myths and rituals, particularly when experienced in the context of the Mass, have served as deeply meaningful forces in my life. When I hear the story of the death and resurrection of Christ, I am enculturated toward hopefulness and away from darkness and despondency. When I assume a kneeling position during the most spiritually significant part of the Mass, I practice the humility I need to love those around me well.

The myths and rituals that imbue my life as a Catholic shape my reality through the messages they carry, even (or perhaps especially) when they operate below the surface of my conscious mind, forming habits and patterns of thinking. The resulting thoughts and actions are often positive, particularly when they draw me out of myself and toward others or the sacred. They can be destructive as well, however, paralyzing me with guilt or shame or prompting me to look at the world in too black-and-white a manner. In every case, they are powerful.

In sum, the power of myth and ritual to affect lived experience both positively and negatively has been obvious to me through my own experiences with religion and spirituality. I am fascinated by this power. I have spent the past several years of my academic life exploring its contours and the ways it expresses itself in other areas of social life that interest me. In a way, this

scholarly pursuit is an attempt to understand myself better by analyzing the nature of the forces that have been particularly impactful on my life.

Introducing Myth and Ritual

To take a less solipsistic perspective, others are clearly affected by myth and ritual as well. Indeed, decades of scholarly work within the disciplines of mythography and ritology have confirmed that the characters of human societies, both ancient and modern, are fundamentally shaped by myth and ritual. In the words of media scholar Roger Silverstone (1988), myth is “a basic level of cultural experience, manifested in words and deeds throughout history, and concerned principally with the articulation of the core concerns and preoccupations of their host cultures” (p. 23). Ultimately, myths are stories that societies tell about themselves to express fundamental fears and values.

Ritual, for its part, can be thought of as “the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life” (Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 27). Rothenbuhler (1998) uses the phrase “the serious life” to describe the idea that all societies have “sacred” ideas or things they “take seriously” (p. 27); he explains that ritual can be thought of as actions that communicate meaning by engaging with these things. Functionally, ritual is a powerful tool for provoking emotion, in its capacity to be a “mechanism for transforming ideas into sentiments and sentiments into significance” (Bell, 1992, p. 182). Relatedly, many ritologists understand ritual’s major function to be

the modeling of ideal relations and structures of values in a society (Bell, 1992). Ritual uses images and icons as tools to define social norms for group internalization. It projects an image of society conducive to the continuation of the existing social order, which can then be taken as reality by community members (Bell, 1992).

Both myth and ritual are significant factors that help shape the culture of a given society. Myths are foundational stories that shape a society's values, while rituals are active, physical processes that reinforce those values through expression. Obviously, that which a group of people considers important will help determine both what those people are like and what it is like to live among them. Thus, interrogating the underlying myths and rituals of our society will help us understand it better. Within the context of this project, this interrogation is intended to shed light on the cultural undercurrents reinforcing systems and institutions of domination, which in turn uphold a state of inequality in the United States.

Introducing Film

The subject of this dissertation can be thought of as a triangle, with myth and ritual inextricably bound together as the first of three points. The second point in the triangle is film. Film is an art form and a storytelling medium that takes a hybrid form incorporating both audio and visual content. Unlike live theater, film is prerecorded, and much of film form is based on processes that

modify “reality” during the production process, such as editing. Unlike television, film is a standalone, focused, and self-contained story, typically ranging from 90 minutes to several hours. In a less granular sense, what makes film unique is its supreme immersiveness. Through cinematography, filmmakers can manipulate angles, perspectives, and camera movements, enhancing the viewer's sense of being present in the story's setting. Additionally, sound design and musical scores further intensify emotions, effectively engaging the senses and eliciting visceral reactions. This convergence of audiovisual elements not only enables film to convey complex emotions and themes effectively but also creates a shared experience, making it a communal and collective form of storytelling that immerses the audience in ways unparalleled by other types of media.

The significance of film in contemporary social life is profound and multifaceted. As an influential art form and popular entertainment medium, film plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural attitudes, ideologies, and perceptions. Through its unique ability to convey compelling narratives, film can both generate collective consciousness and foster critical discussion of ideas taken for granted in culture. Film's nature as a story-centered medium makes it a topic of interest (or potential interest) among scholars across many fields of academia who are increasingly centering narrative in their approaches to the unique problems of their fields. Within such narrative subdisciplines, scholars investigate the structures, themes, and character developments that narratives present, illuminating how these narratives unfold and impact audiences on emotional and

cognitive levels. What is obvious from these efforts is that narrative, and film as one example of a particular type of narrative, can be a powerful catalyst for societal introspection and transformation, enriching contemporary social life through its exploration of human experiences and the complexities of our shared world.

In my own life, I experienced film in precisely this way, as a conduit for understanding and empathy. During my college years, the most important personal development I underwent was learning to let go of competitiveness with and judgment of others, replacing these destructive habits with true empathy and appreciation of difference in those around me. This maturation process was primarily caused by a simple exposure to peers with different viewpoints and lifestyles, but it was also aided by my intense interest in film that developed during this time.

Just as my empathy for others grew when I began to meet people with problems and solutions unimaginably foreign to me, watching films also exposed me to people who are different from me in every possible way, people who I would never organically meet in my daily life. As I watched more and more films, and especially when I watched *great* films, I found myself connecting with characters' stories and struggles in a deeply personal way. I have since fallen in love with countless film characters, and I have been instructed by their mistakes, hurt by their tragedies, and inspired by their ways of living. I observe people who

I might typically judge, and instead of criticizing them, the film helps me understand and respect why they make the decisions they do.

As discussed, film's profound ability to impact both one's personal identity and understanding of the world makes it another social force, along with myth and ritual, that is ripe for sociological study. Film is linked to these other two concepts by a shared relationship to action. A ritual is a meaningful physical action performed by a person, and film is a visual medium that allows viewers to observe other people performing actions. Therefore, film is one potential means by which the meanings carried by rituals and their related myths can be communicated to the public. This dissertation will consider film in this way, as an important transmitter of a society's deep cultural values and assumptions.

This conception of film's social function is supported by a body of theory within mass communication literature called cultivation theory. With a basis in several decades of empirical research, cultivation theory argues that mass media viewers' viewpoints are shaped through the intaking of repetitive messages through media products. This process is thought to serve a social control function, as the systemic operation of media institutions produces ideological content serving the elites who control the institutions (Shanahan & Morgan, 2004). This project makes a very similar argument vis-à-vis the films in its sample.

Connecting to Criminology

The third point of the triangle that makes up this criminology dissertation is, of course, criminology. I have not had intensely personal experiences with crime or criminal justice like I have with myth, ritual, and film. However, I have long been drawn to these subjects in that they serve as stages for social morality plays. Indeed, the way a society thinks about crime and criminal justice is often a window into its most primal beliefs and anxieties about the nature of human life. Understanding the forces operating within the realm of crime and criminal justice in any society necessitates exploring such topics as the nature of good and evil, the possibility of forgiveness, and the drivers of fundamental human needs like safety and order. My interest in these topics has resulted in a natural affinity with one subfield of criminology—cultural criminology—which centers culture as a primary area of social life in which such questions are worked out.

Cultural criminologists focus their work on probing the meaning of crime- and criminal justice-related practices and discourses; they are interested in the ways that cultural products both shape and are shaped by these meanings. Cultural forms produced by the mass media, such as news articles and television procedurals, hold particular interest to cultural criminologists in their perceived ability to manufacture “official definitions of reality” that often go unchallenged in their underlying assumptions about the world (Ferrell, 1999). Television and news media are popular sites for such analysis, but in the past two decades,

calls to center film as a key ideological site have come from scholars such as Nicole Rafter (2000), Michelle Brown (2009), and Majid Yar (2010).

Crime Myths and Rituals in Media

Cultural criminologists argue that reality is defined when interests of powerful groups coalesce in media representations of crime and punishment (such as police films) to form ideological hegemony. Many of these images and stories are simplistic and conventional in character, and by promoting certain messages, they work to maintain the dominant logics of law and order (Kappeler & Potter, 2018). Examples include making artificial distinctions between lawbreakers and law-abiders that foment punitive attitudes, telling us that the current methods we use to respond to crime are appropriate and do not need reforming, and masking the structural issues that lead to crime (Kappeler & Potter, 2018). Kappeler and Potter (2018) call representations such as these “crime myths”, in line with the idea that myths are stories that societies use to express “basic concerns, core values, and deep anxieties” (Silverstone, 1988, p. 24). Kappeler & Potter (2018) go on to argue that crime myths ultimately work to “create a collective belief system” (p. 5) that serves the interests of powerful groups.

We see crime myth at work when the media dehumanizes lawbreakers by calling them “monsters or animals” while simultaneously cherry-picking victims’ biographies to emphasize only the good. We see it in the rhetoric of the thin blue

line, where police are constructed as warriors who must take violent action to defend their territory against savagery and chaos. We see it in the common refrain that a crime is “unthinkable” or “unimaginable,” a view that moves us to lock up “incorrigibles” rather than work to understand people whose lives have been shaped by marginalization, inequality, and pain. When these messages are promoted rhetorically in the form of mythic narratives, they become particularly salient.

In addition to simply being stated rhetorically, crime myths are also expressed in a more concrete form through their accompanying rituals. To provide an example, consider the ritual of the state execution. The formalized and dramatized nature of capital punishment makes it ritualistic in form. Beyond this, from a perspective of symbolic meaning, modern capital punishment is a highly expressive act that communicates our society’s mythic values.

The capital trial, an event ending in the proclamation that the prisoner is guilty and worthy of death in his guilt, allows the state to express that the lawbreaker is fundamentally different from the conventional public and that he made his choices freely and individually. In the act of execution itself, when the state takes the life of its citizen, it also communicates its supreme power over life and death, assuring the public that the exercise of this power will keep them safe. These mythic messages, rather than being conveyed only rhetorically, are delivered in a much more potent manner through the mode of action that is inherent to ritual (Johnson, 1998; Pellegrino, 2019).

This example highlights the contention of cultural criminologists that cultural representations (and especially media representations) of crime and punishment are significant topics of study, and that they are often suffused with mythic and ritual content. Therefore, scholars seeking to understand the character of a society's criminal justice schemas must be attentive to the cultural forms that undergird political and policy formations, ultimately shaping public opinions of those formations.

What is not clear in cultural criminological work is the mechanistic process by which cultural ideas present in media come to form deep, lasting worldviews in the minds of audiences. The beginnings of a provocative answer to this question can be found in the previously mentioned body of mass communication theory called "cultivation theory." Though scholarly work based on cultivation theory has found that repetitive media viewing shapes audiences' worldviews, cultivation theorists have not yet been able to answer the question of "how," or by what specific process, this effect comes about. Based on the extant cultivation theory literature, Shanahan and Morgan (2004) suggest that the answer is likely related to narrative; they ultimately prescribe deeper study into media forms' narrative characteristics as a path toward a solution. This call is heeded in this dissertation, which seeks to interrogate the presence of myth (a particular kind of narrative) and its accompanying ritual within popular police films in order to unpack the salience of dominant cultural messages around crime and punishment.

The Post-Fact Era and the Crisis of Criminal Justice

The present is a particularly appropriate time to analyze a portion of the criminal justice system through a lens of myth and ritual. Over the past eight years, it has been widely claimed in academia that we are currently living in a “post-fact” era. The term “post-fact,” along with its close relatives “post-truth” and “post-reality,” refers to a situation in which speaking the truth and making claims based on fact are no longer considered important (Lockie, 2016).

This idea was conceptualized at least a decade ago but was not popularized until 2016. It entered mainstream discourse at this time in connection with a number of concurrent global events, such as Donald Trump’s U.S. presidential campaign and the Brexit debates in the U.K., that featured flagrantly dishonest rhetoric and appeals to base emotions, chiefly prejudice and hate (Lockie, 2016). Since then, scholars across the world have theorized how we arrived in this “post-truth” epoch and what it means for our world moving forward. Recent trends such as widespread COVID-19 denial and vaccine misinformation, as well as continued rejection of the realities of climate change, have suggested that “post-truthiness” is here to stay.

Support for this “post-fact” idea can certainly be found in U.S. criminal justice discourse. Indeed, we know that media outlets are incentivized to present sensationalized crime content that attracts viewers rather than telling nuanced, contextualized stories that are more accurate. Similarly, our legislators are motivated to stoke panic and outrage around crime issues rather than presenting

facts or truth. In this way, legislators engender public support by manufacturing an illusion that their policies alleviate the fear and anger they are actually responsible for stirring up in the first place (Kappeler & Potter, 2018). In a post-fact society, these loud and ubiquitous voices are the ones with power. They reach even higher levels of influence when they can make their positions salient and deeply felt, convincing the public that it is in their best interest to adopt them even when it is objectively not.

In such an era, it becomes imperative to pay particular attention to the cultural currents that operate beneath the surface of rationality, stirring up the types of deeply held sentiments that we do not always feel comfortable probing. Myth and ritual are subconscious or sub-rational forces of this kind. If we neglect to interrogate their nature and role within contemporary discourse, we will miss crucial learnings about the cultural milieu perpetuating our oppressive system of criminal justice.

When I began to formulate a specific dissertation topic that could address these issues, my initial goal was to treat the U.S. criminal justice system in its entirety, spotlighting three subcategories of films: police films, courtroom films, and prison films. In each of these areas—policing, courts, and prisons—vulnerable people, many from historically marginalized groups, engage in power struggles against state agents that are unbalanced in the state's favor. The material power that police officers, prosecutors, and correctional officers hold is certainly a major source of the injustices that occur far too often in the criminal

justice system. However, the cultural discourses and attitudes swirling around these subjects are also part of the story; they work to reinforce the idea that the state and its agents are right to take any action they deem appropriate as long as it is under the guise of public safety. I initially wanted my study to cover all of these topics, ultimately drawing conclusions about the U.S. criminal justice system as a whole.

I first created my initial sample of films, which included drama films that: 1) were produced in the twenty-first century, 2) took place in the U.S., and 3) had one of the three facets of the U.S. criminal justice system listed above as their subjects. When my list was complete, I noticed that it was markedly lopsided in favor of films centered on police. Due to this finding, I made the decision to center my project solely on police films. I created a revised research plan, which focused solely on policing for the reasons outlined above. A plan to interrogate myth and ritual in filmic representations of police naturally led me to the myth of the thin blue line—policing’s central myth—which became a major point of analysis for the project.

Upon further reflection, my choice to narrow my scope to only films about police provided my project with an additional element of timeliness, given the current centrality of police in criminal justice discourse. It can be argued that police are a major source of the state of crisis that characterizes U.S. criminal justice policy and practice in our current moment. This crisis centers on the fact that we as a nation remain entrenched in the era of mass incarceration that

began in the late twentieth century (Beckett, 2022). The carceral system itself clearly plays a major role in this. However, the people sitting in U.S. jail and prison cells, many of whom are members of marginalized groups, do not get there without a culture of policing that first targets them, arrests them, and hands them over to be locked away.

In view of this reality, the contemporary proliferation of police films makes a certain amount of twisted sense. This proves particularly true when considering the intense public interest in the police caused by the last decade's tragic slate of police-caused killings and the social uprisings that have accompanied them. For better or for worse, the police are on the public mind. This fact is reflected in the predominance of police-centered films in 21st century Hollywood.

Research Questions and Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation is focused on four core concepts—myth, ritual, film, and criminal justice. More specifically, this dissertation seeks to reveal the mythic and ritual content contained in filmic depictions of U.S. policing and interrogate its ideological effects, both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. These aims can be summarized in the following three primary research questions:

- 1) What are the myths that undergird popular U.S. cultural understandings of the police and their social role?

- 2) How are these policing-related myths represented in 21st century domestic drama films centered on policing, both on their own and in concretized ritual forms? How are they subverted?
- 3) What ideological work do these mythic and ritualized representations perform, vis-à-vis state power?

To answer these questions, I perform close viewings of a purposive sample of popular domestic drama films centered on policing and an ethnographic content analysis (ECA) of the ritual and mythic content contained therein. The close viewing portion of the study aims to uncover the underlying myths and rituals that shape prevailing cultural understandings of the police and their societal role. The ECA portion then seeks to analyze how these myths and rituals are represented within popular cinematic narratives, exploring the ways in which these representations contribute to ideological effects concerning state power.

Ultimately, the dissertation aims to identify and disrupt harmful and oppressive law-and-order ideologies perpetuated through cinematic portrayals of policing. The findings will shed light on the specific ways that the social forces of film, myth, and ritual influence public perceptions and representations of law enforcement, thus treating areas that are undertheorized in the criminological literature and taken for granted in modern society.

This chapter has introduced the dissertation by presenting the core concepts of myth, ritual, and film, explaining their relations to criminology, and

arguing the value of this work for our current criminological moment. Chapter 2 reviews the extant literature relevant to the project's core concepts, and it outlines the theoretical frameworks which serve as the anchors for the study. An eclectic theoretical foundation blending Durkheimian functionalism and Marxian ideology theory allows for a comprehensive view of the "definition of reality" function performed by both myth/ritual and media, which I will argue is being performed in popular police film. Chapter 3 summarizes my methodological approach for this study, which follows Altheide and Schneider (2013) in their ECA method of data collection and analysis.

The second half of the dissertation begins with Chapter 4, which summarizes and analyzes the study's results. The results are grouped into three major analytic categories, which are based on derivative myths that form parts of the larger thin blue line mythology. These three derivative myths are the myth of good and evil, the myth of the beleaguered professional, and the myth of us versus them. This chapter defines each derivative myth and provides examples of the presence and subversion of each within the study's sample of films. Finally, Chapter 5 presents the meaning, significance, and social relevance of the study's results. This final chapter also reviews the study's limitations and suggests avenues for further research before providing brief concluding thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THEORY AND LITERATURE

The core contentions of this dissertation are that contemporary U.S. police films have an ideological effect that is related to state power, and that this effect is accomplished, at least in part, by mythic and ritualized forms present in the filmic content. To support these assertions, this dissertation will draw upon a diverse set of theoretical traditions: cultivation theory, narrative and cultural criminologies, mythography, ritology, Durkheimian functionalism, and Marxian ideology theory. In this chapter's synthetic review of theory and literature, the reader will be introduced to the necessary concepts and arguments from each body of theory or literature as well as the ways in which the areas may be bridged. In doing so, this chapter will also explore the extant scholarly work on the topics central to this dissertation and highlight the unique contributions of the study. The policing literature is not directly treated in this chapter; rather, the most relevant aspects of historical and contemporary studies of policing and police power will be brought in later as a component of my analysis.

To Myth Through Narrative: Cultivation Theory and Narrative Criminology

The argument that media forms have an ideological effect on their viewers has been made using several different approaches across multiple disciplines. One approach particularly germane to this study is cultivation theory, a body of theory within the mass communication literature. Cultivation theory was first

developed over several decades of research by mass communication theorist George Gerbner, who found that exposure to repetitive messages through television shaped viewers' beliefs about the world (Wilson et al., 2019).

Cultivation theorists further argue that media forms serve a social control function in modern society. More specifically, "media are used in social systems to build consensus (if not agreement) on positions through shared terms of discourse and assumptions about priorities and values," and "the system works so as to benefit social elites" (Shanahan & Morgan, 2004, p. 15), based on elites' ownership of media institutions. Cultivation theory does not claim that there is a cabal of elites systematically and consciously plotting to further their own aims. Rather, it posits that "dominant cultural institutions, clearly serving economic elites, are *systemically* structured so as to most often favor the viewpoints and information that would help those economic elites in the long run" (Shanahan & Morgan, 2004, p. 17). In addition, the viewer is not considered to be "passive and defenseless" to the messages being promulgated through media forms. It is nevertheless considered notable that "audiences frequently 'get' messages from message systems that have been structured to reflect the interests of social elites" (Shanahan & Morgan, 2004, p. 17), though levels of absorption are thought to differ based on the individual viewer.

Cultivation theory and its underlying logics have been extended by researchers to nearly every mass medium, including film and even police film more specifically (Baker, 2021; Welsh et al., 2011; Wilson & Blackburn, 2014;

Wilson et al., 2019). Those who have utilized cultivation theory to study the social effects of police films have found that film contributes to an “American sense of reality” that justifies police use of force (Wilson et al., 2019, p. 15), promotes sexist beliefs within the institution of policing (Wilson & Blackburn, 2014), and reinforces “ideas... that violence is the only way to achieve ‘compliance’ [and] that communities of color require harsher policing than predominantly white communities” (Baker, 2021).

The extant work within cultivation theory makes the case that media forms, including film, have an ideological effect on viewers. However, cultivation theory is not without problematic weaknesses. Most significantly, cultivation theorists Shanahan and Morgan (2004) note that the “how” of cultivation theory—the specific, mechanistic causal process by which media messages stick in audiences’ minds and transform into worldviews—has not been sufficiently explained. Based on their meta-analysis of attempts to answer that very question, they conclude that the best explanation is likely related to narrative.

For Shanahan and Morgan (2004), centering narrative or story is crucial to the further development of cultivation theory. They argue that in “real life” we learn through experiences, which are essentially self-taught stories about how the world works. As “the story is the form of communication whose purpose is the assignment and structuration of social meaning” (pp. 193-194), the same learning process happens when we take in stories through the mass media. One example the authors provide is that stories told through the media shape our

morality by “telling us who are the ‘good’ characters and the ‘bad’ and what happens to each” (p. 194). Ultimately, to get at the question of how media forms carry information to viewers, the authors call for an understanding of cultivation as “a process within which viewers construct world-interpreting ‘meta-narratives’” (p. 194) that are consistent with the particular worlds constructed in the media forms they intake.

This project endeavors to do exactly the work suggested by Shanahan and Morgan by uncovering the myth—a particular type of foundational narrative or story—and associated ritual that operate within popular police film to promote ideologies related to state power. In this effort, this dissertation finds additional theoretical grounding in narrative criminology, a subfield of criminology that centers narrative as crucial to understanding the causal path of harmful action (Presser & Sandberg, 2015).

Narrative criminologists are attentive to myth in its essential nature as a story; within narrative criminology, myth is understood alongside narrative more broadly as an animating and structuring force that can do real social work to create and perpetuate harm. Indeed, in her discussion of narrative criminological studies on mass harm, Presser (2016) names “bear[ing] out the essential role of mythologized ideology” as the overarching goal of that line of scholarship, a goal that is shared by this dissertation. This project’s connection between myth and the realm of crime and criminal justice is thus well-supported by extant criminological work.

One major difference between this project and work within narrative criminology is that the latter deals primarily with nonfiction narrative and thus does not typically utilize narrative film as a site of analysis. This project's utilization of narrative film, then, must find its basis in another area of criminology.

Incorporating Film: Cultural Criminology's Contribution

Cultural criminology is another subfield that, like narrative criminology, belongs to criminology's critical tradition. Cultural criminology can be understood as "an array of perspectives linked by sensitivities to image, meaning, and representation in the study of crime and crime control" (Ferrell, 1999, p. 396). It centers the symbolic work that cultural products such as media forms do in society. Cultural criminologists are interested in exploring the ways that crime and crime control are depicted in culture; they contend that these representations are deeply influential in shaping the meanings that crime and punishment hold for members of a society.

Jeff Ferrell (1999) uses the term "hall of mirrors" to describe the relationship between reality and representation that cultural criminologists theorize. For cultural criminologists, the events and identities that society labels as "criminal" emerge from within environments that are heavily saturated with media. People who commit criminal acts are often enacting styles they see in media, while the images they consume are themselves being shaped by events

that continually happen in the real world (Ferrell, 1999). Thus, no straightforward temporal order exists; cause and effect collapse, making represented images ultimately indistinguishable from reality. In our thoroughly mediatized late modernity, images of crime and crime control are as “real” as crimes and punishments themselves in their ability to shape the world (Hayward, 2010).

Therefore, the power of representation, which can be used either as a means of social control or one of resistance, lies in its ability to both reflect and create “reality.” Indeed, a major assertion of cultural criminology is that the contemporary media (and especially the mass media) possess the power to manufacture “official definitions of reality” that often go unchallenged in their underlying assumptions about the world (Ferrell, 1999), such as the idea that the state has a moral monopoly on violence. These “ongoing media representations... emerge out of an alliance of convenience between media institutions and criminal justice agencies, serv[ing] to promote and legitimate broader political agendas regarding crime” (Ferrell, 1999, p. 406), such as mobilizing support for punitive policies.

Within cultural criminology, the most popular cultural forms for study have been television shows and news media programs focused on crime. However, scholars such as Nicole Rafter (2000), Michelle Brown (2009), and Majid Yar (2010) have argued that film deserves equal treatment in cultural criminological scholarship. Rafter (2000) holds that “movies have become the central vehicle for the dissemination of popular culture in the United States... [and they] play a

major role internationally in the dispersion of images, myths, and values. For many of us, they are a significant source... of ideas about crime and criminals” (vii).

Describing Rafter’s approach, Yar (2010) notes that her work “exposes the ways in which popular representations embody dominant narratives of law and order and in doing so help to maintain existing systems of power and powerlessness, inclusion and exclusion, normalization and stigmatization” (p. 73). Ultimately, Rafter, Yar, and other cultural criminologists focused on film maintain that film is a key carrier for crime and punishment ideology, and that the ways in which crime and punishment are presented in film are deeply significant. The current study bases its selection of police film as the primary site of analysis on cultural criminological findings that media representations of criminal justice, including those in popular film, do significant ideological work.

Myth: Structure and Function

As mentioned, Shanahan and Morgan (2004) elucidate a gap in the cultivation theory literature regarding the causal mechanisms by which mass media messages crystallize into worldviews in the minds of audiences. The authors also suggest that the missing piece is likely narrative in nature, due to the powerful cognitive effect of stories. In its centering of myth and ritual in police films, the current study is intended to help fill this gap. To attempt to do so first requires establishment of what exactly is meant by myth and ritual.

Myth, which will serve as the starting point, engenders a wide range of differing conceptions within literature, as do many concepts in the humanities and social sciences. Even those scholars situated within the discipline of mythography disagree on myth's nature and precise meaning. One significant divergence of this kind centers on whether the concept of myth should be approached positively or negatively. Taking a positive approach means seeing myths "as really existing, important social entities that express and mold cultures" (Doty, 2000, p. 13). Taking a negative approach to myth means using the term in a more colloquial sense, to describe a statement or claim that is by definition fictitious, often with the additional connotations of "unreal" or "unnecessary" (Doty, 2000).

In this dissertation, myth will be used in the former sense, i.e., as a powerful social entity. The negative usage of the term is incompatible with the aims of this dissertation; in many cases, determining the truth values of the policing myths that are of interest to this study is outside the study's scope. What is more relevant is the fact that a force such as a given myth exists in the cultural sphere at all; this means that it has a social effect, regardless of any consideration of its alignment with the "objective" nature of policing in the "real world." In the words of Crank, (2016) "the suggestion not to take [a] story too seriously fails to recognize the power of myth has a vehicle for the transmission of values in culture... what counts is not whether the story is true but whether it is told" (p. 180). Presser (2016) expresses a similar sentiment when noting that "the

narrative criminology scholar has an interest in [myths] whatever their presumed accuracy or inaccuracy. We wonder about the impact of stories; it matters little whether they are ‘true’ or ‘false’” (p. 139). Aligned with Crank’s and Presser’s approaches to myth, the nature and effect of policing myths, rather than their truth value, is what this study seeks to illuminate.

In addition to using myth in its positive sense, this dissertation will use it with a particular meaning. Following Doty (2000), the term “myth” will be used here to describe “the fundamental religious or philosophical beliefs of a culture, expressed through ritual behavior or through the graphic or literary arts, and forming a constitutive part of a society’s worldview” (p. 13). In essence, myth is a particular type of narrative or story, one that takes a society’s foundational ideas, beliefs, or institutions as its subject. Myths are formulaic, traditional, and reassuring to those who create them, and they are the result of the collective self-reflection of a culture (Silverstone, 1988). In the words of media scholar Roger Silverstone (1988), myth is one of humanity’s “ways of expressing basic concerns, core values, and deep anxieties” (p. 24) through storytelling about itself.

Doty’s and Silverstone’s similar conceptions of myth can both be traced back to the work of prominent twentieth-century structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. In his research, Lévi-Strauss (1985) sought to uncover the ways that “apparently arbitrary mythical representations link up into systems that link up with reality, natural as well as social, in order to reflect, obscure, or contradict

it” (p. 122). He argued in his writings that a society’s cultural forms are highly influential in shaping the behavior of its people, and that culture can shed light on the formation of a society’s myths. It is through Lévi-Strauss that we see myth as the product of a society thinking about itself, “masticating the essential categories and contradictions in its way of life through a system of stories that preserve and legitimate its identity” (Silverstone, 1988, p. 29).

Turning from structure to function, scholars of myth widely agree on some functions of myth while diverging on others. It is well understood, for example, that myths provide value-laden models that members of a particular society use to understand their world (Doty, 2000; Flood, 2002; Manning, 1977; Paul, 2014; Robertson, 1980), and that they stabilize societies by expressing and resolving social contradictions (Flood, 2002; Manning, 1977; Robertson, 1980) and creating social commonalities that strengthen community bonds (Doty, 2000; Manning, 2001; Paul, 2014; Wuthnow, 2006).

One major line of mythography also links myth to workings of power and ideology, whether myth is “a product of” ideology (Peña, 2017), a “discursive form” of it (Paul, 2014), or simply “indispensable to” it (Flood, 2002). Arguments about myth’s specific relationship to ideology differ based on the scholar’s conception of ideology and its functions. One tradition steeped in Marxian thought holds that ideology is expressed by the dominant social group as means of expressing, naturalizing and justifying the current unequal sociopolitical order that sustains their power (Coward & Ellis, 1977; Flood, 2002; Peña, 2017). Thus,

theorists in this tradition thus see myth as one type of ideological tool that maintains hegemony in its creation and dispersal (Barthes, 1957; Kertzer, 1988; Peña, 2017).

Supporting this argument is the idea that myths often tell stories about the foundational principles of human societies, the principles that have shaped the structures and characters of those societies. Myths, then, are often the stories of victors, or those who were able to institute their principles through power. Additionally, in the telling and retelling of these stories throughout the life of the society, there is an inescapable justificatory dimension present. Myths remind and reinforce, always taking care to explain that things are done in a particular way for a reason. Ultimately, when myth operates in this way, it advances the idea that the existing order is natural and should continue operating as is (Peña, 2017; Wuthnow, 2006). This function is particularly salient in societies like the contemporary U.S., where the existing political economy is dependent on the persistence of economic and social inequalities.

Ritual: Structure and Function

To get a full picture of the type of myth-related content present in popular U.S. police films, it is crucial to also consider ritual. Ritual is closely associated with myth, often acting as a carrier of sorts for mythic content. Like myth, ritual is also powerfully related to ideology.

Just as myth is studied by scholars within the discipline of mythography, ritual is studied within the related discipline of ritology. As is the case with myth, there is considerable disagreement among ritologists on how to define the term “ritual” (Snoek, 2006, p. 3). However, matters of consensus (or at least near-consensus) do exist in the literature. Most ritologists agree that ritual is a type of human action that is formalized, performative, and deeply meaningful, and that it functions to concretize the abstract ideas that hold symbolic value for a society, i.e., myths (Bell, 1997; Ebrey, 1991; Goodman, 1988).

A concise definition of ritual incorporating all of these concepts can be found in Rothenbuhler (1998). The author begins with the idea that all societies have “sacred” ideas or things they “take seriously,” that when interacted with constitute the “serious life.” Seeking a “maximally general, formally rigorous, yet substantively flexible definition” (p. 27) of ritual, Rothenbuhler advances the following conception: “ritual is the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life” (p. 27).

Opinions within ritology have also historically differed on the precise relationship between ritual and myth. However, it is commonly held in the contemporary literature that “myths are associated with ritual, as beliefs to action, both together defining a transcendent and liminal space and time for a people in their otherwise mundane reality” (Silverstone, 1988, p. 23). Here Silverstone (1988) connects belief, which is ideal, with action, which is material. Beliefs are important ideas we hold that we express or live out in a concrete way through our

actions. Silverstone explains that myth and ritual have the same relationship. Thus, myths are ideas held by human beings that are expressed or lived out in a concrete way through ritual. In other words, if ritual is a form of action, myth is the content that populates or fills in ritual's form. This dissertation will adhere to the conception of ritual expressed by Silverstone, i.e., a concrete, physical form for the expression of myths.

Ritual's action-oriented nature makes it a particularly important concept for a study in which the data source is film. As an audiovisual medium, the fundamental experience of viewing film is watching figures move, interact, and speak in physical space. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that if a film contains mythic and/or ideological content, it will be expressed at least in part by physical actions or patterns of physical behavior that are related to myth—i.e., ritual. This study is thus attentive to the presence of ritual in addition to the presence of myth in a more pure, unapplied form.

Ritual's further importance in this study is underscored by its relationships to other crucial ideas: communal belief, as expressed in neo-Durkheimian theory, and power and ideology, as expressed in Marxian theory. First, the connection between ritual and communal belief begins with Émile Durkheim's landmark work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. This work focused on religious practices in premodern societies in order to interrogate religion's nature and function as a social phenomenon. Durkheim saw ritual as the fundamental source of religion, holding that a society's "religious beliefs, ideas, and values"

derive from its “principal rites and ceremonies” (Stephenson, 2015, p. 39).

Having identified ritual’s centrality in human life, he then analyzed the social phenomenon of ritual using a functionalist perspective, ultimately seeking to understand what useful social purpose it serves.

For Durkheim (1912), beliefs (we can substitute “myths” for “beliefs” here) are symbolic representations of sacred ideas while rituals are set patterns of action related to them. Both components are shared, or are intended to be shared, by all members of the social community. This shared conception of the sacred is referred to as “the collective consciousness” or “collective representation.” In essence, the collective consciousness binds discrete individuals into a community. A powerful sense of solidarity is created within a community when the collective consciousness is publicly expressed and reinforced during special, patterned ceremonies. These ceremonies, known as rituals, continually join community members to each other and to the community itself (Durkheim, 1912). In the words of Bell (1992), Durkheim used this argument to ultimately identify ritual’s social role as “dramatizing collective representations and endowing them with a mystical ethos that in the course of the communal experience did not merely promote acceptance of those representations but also inculcated deep-seated affective responses to them” (p. 171).

The Durkheimian functionalist perspective on ritual has been enormously influential on the field of ritology, with nearly every theorist either rooting their ideas in or responding to Durkheim’s contentions. The theorists in the former

category are known as “neo-Durkheimians.” One major branch of neo-Durkheimian theory is the “ritual as social control” framework, which holds that those in a community who possess authority can use ritual to impose standards of conformity and conventionality on others (Bell, 1992). Put another way, under the idea of “ritual as social control,” ritual is “thought to express beliefs in symbolic ways for the purposes of their continual reaffirmation and inculcation” (Bell, 1992, p. 182).

Out of the “ritual as social control” framework comes the “definition of reality thesis.” The scholars holding this view, such as Clifford Geertz (1980), Mary Douglas (1960), and Steven Lukes (1977) advance a conception of ritual “as a symbolic modeling of the social order, with this imaging or iconic quality as the basis of its efficacy” (Bell, 1992, p. 175). These theorists focus on ritual’s tendency to represent the values and social relations that are ideal from the perspective of societal order maintenance. Bell (1992) considers the following quote from Lukes’ 1977 essay *Power and Structure* to be characteristic of this approach:

[Ritual] helps to define as authoritative certain ways of seeing society: it serves to specify what in society is of special significance, it draws people’s attention to certain forms of relationships and activity—and at the same time, therefore, it deflects their attention from other forms, since every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing. (p. 68)

Here Lukes (1977) emphasizes the power that ritual holds over worldview and perspective formation, and thus over the definitions of reality in each society. Geertz & Geertz make a similar argument in their book *Kinship in Bali* (1975). For the authors, “culture uses ritual to control by means of sets of assumptions about the way things are and should be,” (Bell, 1992, p. 176). Geertz & Geertz note that ritual’s ability to operate below the level of consciousness makes it even more effective in this regard.

Proponents of the definition of reality thesis incorporate both Durkheimian and Marxian perspectives into their theory. Though it may appear counterintuitive, the two perspectives are compatible in many ways. In both, ideology holds a key place as “a universal dimension of social life and central to social cohesion” (Bell, 1992, p. 188). Ideology, expressed through myth, is then related to ritual’s function as “an ideologizing mechanism for transforming ideas into sentiments and sentiments into significance” (Bell, 1992, p. 182). In addition, “both envision a broad sharing of a political worldview by members of a society, with rituals employed to express and reinvigorate it” (Kertzer, 1988, p. 39).

These similarities indicate the legitimacy of synthesizing ideas from both perspectives into a single theoretical approach. One can accept the functionalist notion that modern, capitalist society tends to work to perpetuate itself through the generation of solidarity while also acknowledging the Marxian view that solidarity generation might be a negative development in an oppressive society. Relatedly, it is entirely possible to acknowledge the existence of dominant

structures and forces intended to return society to a state of equilibrium whenever possible, but then also hold that conflict between warring classes is a common feature of human communities due to structural inequality.

Viewing ritual with a perspective that combines aspects of Durkheimian functionalism with aspects of a Marxian perspective on power and ideology grants it a robust set of functions not limited to promoting solidarity. Ritual becomes ideological, operating both emotionally and cognitively to communicate culture, promote the internalization of the dominant group's chosen values as expressed through myth, and shape individual worldviews to align with these values. These claims echo those made in cultural criminology about media and the blurring of representation and reality within it. Recall that in the cultural criminological literature, media representations of crime and criminal justice are said to denote the ideas that the public accepts as reality. A very similar argument has been made here about ritual, in its function as a carrier of myth.

The first half of this chapter has fulfilled two functions: it has introduced the relevant bodies of theory and literature supporting the overall argument of the study, and it has established particular conceptions of the study's key terms—myth and ritual. Before exploring the ways that myth and ritual are present in popular U.S. police films, it is necessary to first highlight the foundational myths of American society, out of which flow the myths surrounding the institution of policing in the United States.

American Myths

As mentioned, this dissertation holds that myths are “the fundamental religious or philosophical beliefs of a culture, expressed through ritual behavior or through the graphic or literary arts, and forming a constitutive part of a society’s worldview” (Doty, 2000, p. 13). Every society has a particular set of myths that helps to determine the character of its culture and the beliefs of its inhabitants. This is certainly true in the U.S.; indeed, the widely held notion that U.S. has an extremely unique and specific national culture is captured by the well-known term “American exceptionalism.”

The term American exceptionalism describes the idea that the U.S. must be thought of as essentially different from other nations because of the unique sociohistorical characteristics of its founding and its development. The origin of the term is thought to lie in Alexis de Tocqueville’s seminal nineteenth-century work *Democracy in America*; Tocqueville used the word “exceptional” to describe the American democratic political system, contrasting it with the political situation in his home country of France (Paul, 2014). It was more recently broadened to its current usage, which varies quite a bit based on the user. Some use “American exceptionalism” to connote a sense of the exemplary, while others use it in a more value-neutral manner that simply indicates difference from other nations (Paul, 2014).

At the center of the notion of American exceptionalism lies a set of ideologies or beliefs about the U.S. and its people, which combine to create a

distinctly American worldview. Different scholars of American exceptionalism have slightly different lists of these beliefs; there are several that appear regularly in the literature and are most relevant to this study, and these will be referred to as “American myths.” The two most relevant, core American myths, each of which branches off to form other myths, are rugged individualism and manifest destiny.

The roots of rugged individualism are found in the broader philosophical tradition of individualism, prized since America’s founding and thought to be “one of the key organizing principles in American culture writ large” (Benke, 2023, p. 1). An emphasis on the freedom and rights of the individual is found throughout the liberal philosophy that inspired the U.S. founding fathers, who rebelled against the heavy hand the British monarch exerted in private affairs. John Locke, for example, identified the locus of political life as the individual who is free to make decisions regarding himself and his possessions as he sees fit. Locke held that government exists primarily to protect these rights. Similarly, Adam Smith argued that a well-ordered economy is made up of individual economic actors, and that the self-interested activity of each contributes to a larger system that ultimately works to benefit all (Benke, 2023).

Individualist ideas like those held by Locke and Smith maintained prominence in American philosophical and political thought throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and they further crystallized into the variant term “rugged individualism.” Rugged individualism, a specifically Americanized

form of individualist philosophy, combines the centering of the free, self-determining individual with a fetishization of grit and hard work. Coined by Herbert Hoover in a 1928 campaign speech, rugged individualism is closely related to both American frontier culture as well as the concept of the “self-made man” (Benke, 2023).

The rugged individual, a figure lauded by Hoover and by American culture writ large, is a person who creates opportunities and achieves success solely by his or her own hard work, in the face of great difficulty and without assistance from others (Hughes et al., 2018; Myers, 2020; Waller, 2022). The archetypal example of the rugged individual is the salt-of-the-earth frontiersman who courageously “conquered” the American Frontier with his physical and mental strength and his resolute hard work.

Rugged individualism is an instructive myth. It tells us that “real” Americans are brave, tough, and hardworking, because the original, historical Americans were like this. Following this logic, cultivation of the traits held by original Americans is the only way to achieve success, and when an individual is prevented from doing so, the fault is fully their own. Therefore, under rugged individualism every person is responsible for their fate, which they have complete control over.

The rugged individualism myth has several close derivatives that follow its same logic. The myth of the American dream describes the view that U.S. society is essentially classless, and that unlimited potential for upward mobility exists for

motivated individuals. Success is then attributed only to effort, while failure and poverty are attributed only to personal failings such as laziness or dependence (Hughes et al., 2018; Myers, 2020; Peña, 2017; Robertson, 1980; Wuthnow, 2006).

In addition, the myth of the morality of capitalism further extends the logic of rugged individualism; it maintains that laziness is a moral defect that actively deserves suffering, while contribution to the capitalist economy at higher and higher levels is expressly moral activity that deserves reward in the form of wealth (Hughes et al., 2018; Peña, 2017; Wuthnow, 2006). All are encouraged to partake of the “sacred freedom to amass absolute wealth” (Peña, 2017, p. 18) via the capitalist market system. A great fortune becomes a sign of one’s personal virtue, as well as a cultural signal that one is living a good and worthy life.

Apart from rugged individualism (and its derivatives), the other core American myth relevant to this study is the myth of manifest destiny. Like rugged individualism, the concept of manifest destiny is related to the powerful, mythic image of the American Frontier. The term “manifest destiny,” developed in the nineteenth century, refers to the belief that the early Americans were predestined by God to settle the Frontier. The American settlers believed that they held legitimate claim to the American continent, and that they were called to conquer the land from the eastern coast of the United States to the Pacific Ocean (Hughes et al., 2018; Myers, 2020; Robertson, 1980; Saito, 2010).

The myth of manifest destiny is historically specific in that it was advanced to justify a particular historical action, i.e., westward expansion. The manifest destiny myth was used primarily by the early American settlers to rationalize their genocide of the Native American people. The settlers held the Native Americans to be inferior to themselves, incapable of living in “civilized” society, and a barrier to their God-given mission of expanding their area of control to the western coast (Hughes et al., 2018; Saito, 2010). This historical specificity means that the manifest destiny myth does not persist into the present in precisely the same way as other American myths do (Hughes et al., 2018). However, the myth remains relevant because its foundational assumptions have endured. In the centuries that followed the westward expansion period, the white supremacist ideology underlying manifest destiny has continued to persist in the U.S.

This foundational bigotry also finds expression in the closely related myth of selective equality. As mentioned, the U.S. founding fathers subscribed to a political philosophy that centered individual freedom and rights. However, despite their famous creed that “all men are created equal,” in practice it is clear that they actually meant something else. A more honest sentiment is that all people are equal as long as they are members of dominant sociocultural groups and conform to dominant social standards and measures of performance.

Rather than any true sense of freedom and equality, U.S. culture is characterized instead by a myth of *selective* equality, or equality based on a strict hierarchy of demographics and behavior. Indeed, at the time of the founding,

legal and political rights were granted along racial, sexual, and economic lines. Throughout most of U.S. history, members of racial minority groups, women, and the poor have had considerably abridged sets of rights because they were considered naturally inferior to wealthy white men. Though most of these inequalities have now been formally remedied by law, informal but very real inequalities still permeate U.S. society. Obvious examples include the gender pay gap and the disproportionate number of racial minorities and low-income people in prisons and jails.

American culture also practices more subtle deferments of unequal status. Myers (2020) notes that in the contemporary U.S., there are strict cultural requirements for being “considered virtuous citizens, [namely being] property owners, productive, participatory, patriotic, and reproducing more citizens” (p. 48). Those who cannot meet these obligations, the poor in particular, “are seen as not deserving to be treated as full citizens... [and] are controlled and regulated via social norms, policies, and law” (p. 48). Connecting to the myth of rugged individualism, Myers (2020) notes that when equality is discussed as being truly obtainable for all, “it is individualized to a fault” (p. 48), with the unequal citizens unfairly blamed for their inability to overcome a clear lack of structural equality.

The American myths outlined here—rugged individualism, manifest destiny, and their derivatives—create a distinct American worldview. This outlook centers the free, self-determining individual and the capitalist market economy as the most valuable subjects in human life. It sketches out a society in which the

prime directive is to engage in limitless, self-interested economic activity, with the ability to do so successfully being the determinant of one's worth. These are the foundational myths of our society—they describe the predominant values at the time of the founding, and they continue to exert enormous influence on U.S. culture. These myths and the worldviews they create seep into our social institutions. If we wish to understand the myths that influence the way Americans view the police, we must first understand these foundational myths; the former descend directly from the latter.

Myth and Policing

Myth and policing are often linked in criminological literature (Bouza, 1990; Crank, 2016; Linnemann, 2022; Loader, 1997; Manning, 1977, 2001; Meimaridis & Quinan, 2022; Seigel, 2018; Wall, 2021; Wilt, 2022). The affinity between these two cultural categories begins with the link between myth and criminal justice more broadly. Following Doty (2000), I have defined myth as the fundamental beliefs of a culture that are expressed in particular ways and form parts of the society's worldview. Criminal justice is connected to myth, then, because foundational, value-laden interests and anxieties find expression in it. Indeed, the criminal justice system of any society is suffused with questions of good and evil, order and disorder, justice, safety, revenge, harm, and other fundamental social concerns (Loader, 1997; Manning, 2001).

The police become entwined with myth due to their central position within the milieu of culture and myth conjured by criminal justice. The social role of the police has been popularly constructed as “an omnipotent source of authority that is able to face up to the criminal Other” (Loader, 1997, p. 3). The police are the social actors considered primarily responsible for both soothing the cultural anxieties and upholding the cultural values associated with crime and criminal justice. The police officer is certainly not the *only* member of society who is asked to perform this role, but he is top of mind in many ways as a highly visible and widely discussed figure representing criminal justice issues.

Though it is not a controversial claim that policing and myth are related, ideas concerning the precise relationship between the two vary. One powerful and straightforward conception can be found in the work of policing scholar Peter Manning. Manning (1977) identifies one simple idea as the major “policing myth”—that the police have “full and active responsibility for the protection of the community, the prevention of law breaking, and the enforcement of the law” (p. 324). These are the basic functions that the public normally associates with policing. In Manning’s view, however, the notion that the police are capable of performing these tasks even to a minimally acceptable level is patently false. The resultant gap between public expectation and reality must be filled by the creation and reinforcement of policing-related myth. The myth that is formed and performed for this purpose is simply that the police are, at all times, successfully “fighting crime” (Manning, 1977).

What Manning argues is that there exists a deep societal need for the *impression* that the community is being protected, lawbreaking is being prevented, and law is being enforced, even when these things are not actually taking place. Loader (1997) also identifies this need when he contends that the evocation of policing as a cultural concept induces both anxiety and comfort in the public. Policing serves as a reminder that an “undesirable, criminal Other” exists, thereby provoking “feelings of hostility, aggression, powerlessness, violation and vulnerability; a sense that the social world is a rather fragile and troubling place.” However, it also soothes these sentiments by inspiring “sensations of order, authority, and protection... [and] mak[ing] it possible to believe that a powerful force for good stands between them and an anarchic world” (p. 8). Loader is explicating the twofold process that Manning also theorizes—the public feels anxious or fearful about crime, and these feelings are then mollified by invoking the myth of policing. This myth, the belief that the police are good and are capable of restoring order in the face of evil and chaos, essentially serves as a tool for granting existential reassurance.

In addition to discussing the function of the policing myth, Loader (1997) also stresses the influence of morality discourse on the myth’s salience. As Loader notes, the narrative that the police are powerful and capable crimefighters becomes heightened when police are identified as good, and therefore presumably opposed to evil forces. Manning (1977) also gestures toward this idea from the other side (and reiterates his earlier point about the discrepancy

between public expectation and the realities of policing) when he remarks that “the myth provides, in repetitive form, the assumed truth that police force will be applied systematically to isolated and thoroughly evil persons in a predictable and routine fashion... while daily practice falls short” (p. 326). Naturally, police in their most perfect, mythic form would be represented as fighting those who are characterized as fundamentally evil.

Manning (1977) further develops the theme of mythic duality, which he labels “a Manichean *pas de deux* between the two poles of social life” (p. 327), and he identifies additional functions that this duality serves. First, he corroborates the idea that the police are naturally mythic by remarking that “it is oddly appropriate that the police are the epitome of the sacred/secular (that is, a representation at a ceremonial or social level of the political order), while the criminal represents the apotheosis of evil—intentional, systematic, persistent and ever present” (p. 327). He then argues that the mass media represents crime and criminal justice issues in terms of “ritualized encounters” (p. 328) between these dramatic adversaries. Such simplified, essentialized depictions work to distract from contentious philosophical issues concerning law and justice, in addition to their more obvious functions to “reassure and portray the nature of the enemy” (p. 328).

As previously mentioned, one can think of myth as stories that a culture tells itself about itself. What is clear from both Manning’s and Loader’s remarks is that policing-related myth works in precisely this way. First, the idea of crime

creates existential fear and anxiety in the public mind that must be addressed. The social tool that is then created in response is a reassuring myth, one that casts police as heroically good and perfectly capable protectors, successfully defeating fundamentally evil Others who threaten society. This narrative should sound familiar to inhabitants of the 21st century U.S., because in our culture it often goes by another, more familiar name—the thin blue line.

The Thin Blue Line Mythology

The thin blue line's messaging and iconography is ubiquitous in contemporary U.S. culture. It is found on yard signs, flyers in store windows, bumper stickers, hats, and clothing patches. Its image of a black and white U.S. flag with a colored stripe across the middle has become indelibly associated, whether positively or negatively, with police. However, its core idea was originally applied to soldiers, not police officers.

As noted by Correia and Wall (2017), the phrase “thin blue line” is derived from a slightly different phrase—“thin red line”—coined by Rudyard Kipling in his poem *Tommy*. The topic of *Tommy* is British soldiers fighting for England in the Crimean War, whose appearance on the battlefield Kipling (1890) describes as a “thin red line of heroes when the drums begin to roll.” The phrase was later coopted for application to policing, with the color changed to blue to reflect the standard color of police uniforms. William H. Parker, Chief of the Los Angeles Police Department from 1950 to 1966, popularized the new term by using it in his

fiery, propagandistic speeches that blamed racial minorities and communists for the social problems of midcentury Los Angeles (Linnemann, 2022).

The thin blue line mythology conjures an image of blue-clad police officers physically restraining wicked predators from attacking the vulnerable masses. It connotes a mythic clash between good and evil, a dangerous war in which heroic officers constantly put their lives in jeopardy to protect society. It also essentializes justice-involved people as totally and fundamentally evil, the institution of policing as totally and fundamentally good, and everyone else as innocent but naïve, in need of a savior who will bravely do the dirty work to ensure public order. These ideas are mythological because they tell a story related to the foundational beliefs of our culture. They underscore core values of social order and safety and outline how they might be achieved.

In their analysis of thin blue line mythology, which they characterize as being primarily a mythology of war, Correia and Wall (2017) make several relevant points. First, they argue that the ultimate purpose of the creation and promotion of the thin blue line is to legitimize state authority, and that this legitimation process is based on the weaponization of public fears. The public's natural fear of harm and desire for safety are exploited to coerce them into not only supporting the police, but also supporting whatever actions the police deem "necessary" to perform their duties, including lethal violence.

The authors also highlight the word "thin." Correia and Wall (2017) assert that the line between order and chaos, good and evil, sacred and profane is

described as thin to reinforce the idea that police are indispensable. The line's thinness means that society is always under great risk of undergoing an attack that could unravel it completely. As the logic goes, police are needed, but they also need to be able to perform their duties well. This latter claim is made to justify the requests police departments continually make for more funding, more staff, more weapons, and more equipment, the obtaining of which increases their power.

Though they have slightly different emphases, Correia and Wall's remarks on the thin blue line mythology are very similar to both Manning's and Loader's remarks in reference to the policing myth. All agree on a few major points. The first is that the institution of policing in the U.S. has become suffused with myth—foundational narrative that shapes both the internal worldview of the police and the perspective of the public towards the police. The second is that the myth in question has a moral dimension characterizing police as essentially good and justice-involved people as essentially evil. The last is that the myth works first to stoke public fear of crime and then to reassure through emphasis on the capability of the police to take care of the problem (Correia & Wall, 2017; Loader, 1997; Manning, 1977).

Whether this mythic construct discussed by Manning, Loader, and Correia and Wall is referred to as “the thin blue line myth” or “the policing myth,” these policing scholars and many others agree that it exists, that it is central to the character of U.S. policing, and that it has significant social effects (Branch, 2021;

Crank, 2016; Linnemann, 2022; McVey, 2022; Smith & Natalier, 2004; Steinmetz & Petkovsek, 2023; Whitlock & Heitzed, 2021). I make the additional assertion that the thin blue line mythology is a “master” policing myth of sorts, in that it is culturally ubiquitous and embodies many of the themes that make policing uniquely oppressive.

The preceding review of the theory and literature relevant to this project has established the necessary connections between myth, ritual, film, and criminology (more specifically, policing). These connections are brought to fruition in the study at the center of this dissertation, the granular mythological details of which will be explicated in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The research process for this study is guided, beginning to end, by an ethnographic content analysis (ECA) approach following Altheide and Schneider (2013). ECA is an eclectic methodology integrating elements from both ethnography and content analysis methods. ECA is ethnographic in that it involves thick description, or deep attentiveness to behaviors and their meanings. It is content-analytic in that its subjects are texts rather than the lived experiences of “real” human beings. Given these qualities, ECA offers a methodology particularly well-suited to the rigorous study of media forms as symbolic cultural products that are highly significant to the formation processes of their consumers’ identities and worldviews (Altheide & Schneider, 2013).

ECA involves an iterative approach characterized by “constant discovery and constant comparison” (Altheide, 1996, p. 16). In practice, this requires the researcher to adopt a reflexive attitude, allowing themes and codes to emerge from the data in a continual way. Rather than creating coding categories before data collection and analysis as in strictly deductive methods, the codebook is created during the data collection process based on what the data yields. The ECA method has a thorough, five-step process that guides the entire research process. I will explicate here the plan I followed for data collection and analysis based on the five stages.

I must first note that I created an initial plan and proceeded through stage three (data collection) before revising my entire methodological process based on what the data yielded. I initially planned to perform a study that spanned all three major areas of the criminal justice system—policing, prisons, and the criminal trial—and focused on filmic representations of interactions between “civilians” and state agents from each area. When I turned to the data, I found that prosecutors and the legal system more broadly did not represent the type of coercive state power I was interested in interrogating. After excluding data related to prosecutors and courts, I then found that my remaining sample, which then included both films centered on police and films centered on prisons, was extremely lopsided in favor of police-centered films. Based on this finding, I also excluded prison films, leaving only police-centered films.

One additional deviation occurred in my analytic process. I originally planned that my units of analysis would be the scenes within my sample that depicted face-to-face interactions between state and non-state actors. Once I began exploring the data, I found that limiting my analysis in this way did not provide me with enough content. I revised this part of my methodology as well, now considering as data any scene in my chosen films that included mythic or ritualistic content. The highly iterative process that I followed in revising my methodology is in line with ECA’s call for “constant discovery and constant comparison.” When describing each stage of the ECA process in the following

sections, I will detail both my original plan for that stage and the final plan that I followed after my methodological revision.

In stage one, I formulated my research questions and began building familiarity with the types of documents to be included in the sample, i.e., films. I then drafted the following four initial research questions:

- 1) What are the myths that undergird popular U.S. cultural understandings of the police and their social role?
- 2) How are these policing-related myths represented in 21st century domestic drama films centered on policing, both on their own and in concretized ritual forms?
- 3) What ideological work do these mythic and ritualized representations perform, vis-à-vis state power?
- 4) How might these ideological representations be interrupted?

Upon my methodological revision, I tweaked my research questions slightly. The data indicated that the ideological interruptions I was seeking were simply moments of subversion of the myths and rituals I analyzed for Question 2. I therefore made Question 4 more specific and folded it into Question 2. In addition, I found that my methodology was better suited to analyzing ideological messaging than ideological effect, resulting in a slight change of the wording of Question 3. This process resulted in the following three final research questions:

- 1) What are the myths that undergird popular U.S. cultural understandings of the police and their social role?
- 2) How are these policing-related myths represented in 21st century domestic drama films centered on policing, both on their own and in concretized ritual forms? How are they subverted?
- 3) What ideological messages do these mythic and ritualized representations communicate, vis-à-vis state power?

Stage two of ECA involves drafting the research protocol and selecting the sample (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). The research protocol is a general list of what the researcher will be looking for in the data, based on the research questions (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). The research protocol for this dissertation initially included a single, key variable—interactions between criminal justice personnel and non-state actors. When I begin viewing the films in my sample, this is initially what I looked for. After revision, I changed my research protocol to include all mythic or ritualistic content in my sample.

Sampling

Given my specific research interests and questions, the population for this dissertation began as popular U.S. crime drama films during the contemporary era. After revision, it was changed to popular crime drama films *centered on U.S. policing* and produced in the 21st century.

The first distinction is “popular” film. The popular criminology perspective, a subset of cultural criminology, holds that crime media influences public perceptions and opinions of crime and punishment due to its prevalence in the public sphere (Rafter & Brown, 2011). This being the case, I wanted to ensure the films I chose for my data corpus had been widely seen and discussed. To accomplish this, I focused on films with high box-office returns, specifically films that generated at least \$20 million in domestic returns. This number was chosen after a careful review of typical box office returns in the U.S. and a rough gauge of general popularity based on my own prior knowledge. It was also set at \$20 million because this number made the sample manageable in size. This number is admittedly somewhat arbitrary, but given the wide range of box office returns across the sample population, placing a cutoff at any particular number would result in some level of arbitrariness.

The second distinction is “crime drama” film. Crime films are conventionally broken out into “crime comedies” and “crime dramas.” Crime dramas are more appropriate for my project as they speak more to the “realities” of crime and punishment. This was important for the current study as I am ultimately connecting public perceptions of film to public perceptions of “real” criminal justice. To accomplish this, I focused only on films within the specific subgenre of crime drama.

The third distinction is films that are centered on U.S. policing. To fit this requirement, a film needed at least one main character who is a U.S. police

officer and whose engagement in police work is involved with the major plot of the film. is that the films needed to be produced during the 21st century. The final distinction is films produced in the 21st century. I am interested in interrogating the particularities of a specific iteration of power, that of the contemporary U.S. state. As such, films produced before 2000 are not germane. Drawing a boundary at the year 2000 is again somewhat arbitrary, but focusing on films produced in this century gave my inquiry a sense of timeliness that including earlier films would have not. There is a general consensus in criminology that our criminal justice system is currently entrenched in an era of mass incarceration that began in the 1970s (Beckett, 2022). It is reasonable to argue that the year 2000 is late enough into our current era of criminal justice that effects of its specific policies could be widely observed then in much the same way that they are today.

My initial sampling frame was found in the Internet Movie Database's (IMDb) list of the top 50 crime drama films with the highest U.S. box office returns. I reviewed the list and made appropriate exclusions based on the aforementioned criteria, such as excluding films made before 2000 and films that are better classified in another subgenre, such as buddy cop comedies. However, once I narrowed my sample to include police films *only*, I performed thorough internet research resulting in a finding that a suitable sampling frame did not exist. This finding necessitated the creation of a fully original sampling frame.

To create my final sampling frame, I performed thorough internet searches for lists of popular films centered on policing, using the keywords “police,” “policing,” “cop,” “cops,” “law enforcement,” and “detective,” on websites such as the Internet Movie Database, Wikipedia, and Ranker, as well as popular film-related blogs. I aggregated all resulting films into a list, which I continued to populate until I reached a saturation point, i.e., the point in which additional searches did not result in any new films. To create the sample, I then excluded films from the list that did not make over \$20 million in the domestic box office (using box office data from the websites The Numbers and Box Office Mojo), films that were not dramas (using plot data from The Internet Movie Database), and films that were not made in the 21st century (using release date data from The Internet Movie Database). A resulting sample of 20 films remained. The final sample, which is identical to this dissertation’s filmography, is included in this document as Appendix A. The initial sample before methodological revision is included as Appendix B.

My sample is sufficiently large that enough mythic and ritualized content was present for robust analysis and to make claims about the body of contemporary domestic police film as a whole. The specific release years of the sample range from 2000 to 2020, thus covering most of the time available for sampling.

Data Collection

Stage three of ECA involves data collection. The researcher formulates a data management plan and begins collecting the data described in the research protocol, in this case all instances of mythic and ritualized content present in my sample.

All 20 films in my sample are accessible through major rental or streaming platforms, which I used to view them two times each. During my first viewing, I noted the overall level of mythic and ritualized content as “high,” medium,” or “low” and noted all instances of such content along with necessary context. To determine whether mythic and/or ritualized content was present, I utilized definitions of myth and ritual derived from mythographic and ritological literature. These definitions are detailed in this dissertation’s Review of Theory and Literature.

To ensure trustworthiness, I viewed the films a second time and noted any instances of mythic and/or ritualized content that I missed upon first viewing. I then transcribed my notes into digital form and uploaded them into the qualitative data analysis software platform NVivo.

Data Analysis

Stage four of ECA outlines the data analysis process, including tasks of analysis and refinement, comparison and contrast, and summary. The primary

goal of ECA's data analysis process is to interrogate the symbolic meanings present in the researcher's data (Altheide & Schneider, 2013).

Following ECA protocol, I reviewed my data in view of my research questions to analyze and refine it. Specifically, I looked for common themes in the mythic and ritual content present in my sample and created codes based on these themes. In line with ECA's constant discovery and constant comparison technique, my codebook was created during this stage, based on what the data yielded. It is included as Appendix C. For each code I created, I also created a companion code to track instances of its subversion. I coded all of my viewing notes to saturation, i.e., until no additional themes emerged. I then performed an analysis of the symbolic meanings of these themes and the ideological tactics present within them. Finally, I compared and contrasted the notes I generated during analysis and refinement to create summaries of my major findings, formulating answers to each research question.

The last stage of ECA simply consists of drafting the results of the research (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). This stage was completed when I drafted the Results and Analysis and Discussion and Conclusions chapters of this dissertation.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The previous chapter outlined the methodology by which I selected a purposive sample of 21st century U.S. crime drama films centered on policing and utilized ECA techniques to mine the films for mythic and ritualized ideological content. The results of that process will be presented in this chapter, along with an analysis that seeks to answer the research questions at the center of this dissertation by interrogating the ideological work, both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, that is performed.

Results

As mentioned, the ECA approach includes a practice of “constant discovery and constant comparison” requiring the researcher to create his or her codebook during (not before) the data analysis stage, based on what the data yields (Altheide, 1996). In line with this requirement, I created my codebook during my first viewing of the films in my sample. The data yielded seven categories of mythic and ritualized content: “competence,” “danger,” “domination and intimidation,” “full individual responsibility,” “good vs. evil,” “moral superiority,” and “us vs. them.” I also created a companion code for each category to store any content that subverted it.

Once data collection was finished and I proceeded to the analysis stage, I combined any coding categories that contained the same themes or the same

internal logic. This process resulted in three final analytic categories, each corresponding to a policing-related myth that was present in the data. These three mythic categories are “the myth of good and evil,” “the myth of the beleaguered professional,” and “the myth of us versus them.” These categories and their descriptions are included as Appendix D.

I then defined each of these myths, and to ensure trustworthiness, I performed searches for extant literature matching each theme. I found that all three of the mythic categories I derived from my data were well-supported by the literature. In addition, each could be traced back to both foundational American mythology and the “master” policing myth of the thin blue line.

The following sections will define each myth using corroborative material from the criminological literature and explain how each myth is connected to both foundational American myth and the “master” policing myth of the thin blue line. These sections will also describe how each myth is present and subverted in the sample of films in both mythic and ritual forms.

Analysis

The three myths described in this section are individual units of analysis that can be observed in cultural products such as films, television shows, or news stories. They can be found on their own in purely mythic form, or they can be found in ritualized form through concrete actions that display them in a physical manner. For example, one myth that will be described is the myth of good and

evil. The prior discussion of the thin blue line has already alluded to this myth, in which police are characterized as totally good and justice-involved people are characterized as totally evil.

This myth could be present in a cultural product like a film if the film's police officer characters were described with words like "hero" and "brave," while their adversaries were described with words like "scum," "trash," "monster," or "animal." This myth could be present in ritualized form if police officer characters were only ever shown performing heroic deeds like rescuing kidnapped women, while their adversaries were only ever shown performing horrifying deeds such as executing children. Though these are just examples, similar content is present throughout the real police films in the sample. This is the type of mythic representation that will be discussed here, which contributes to the ideological value of crime media.

All three of the final myths derive from the central thin blue line mythology; they can be called myths themselves because they are each component parts of this larger mythology. Each myth gets at certain cultural constructions that exist around the concept of policing. In the U.S., the mainstream representation of police is of fundamentally good and heroic figures who perform the difficult, dangerous, and crucial job of defending a naïve, innocent public against evil predators, who themselves fully will the destruction of goodness and of the social order writ large. The thin blue line mythology and the individual, derivative myths that make up its parts contribute to this representation. This chapter will discuss

the ways that these myths are both presented and subverted in U.S. crime drama film, both on their own in mythic form and in concretized ritual forms. Specifically, each section will provide a general overview of the presence of that particular myth in the sample. The section will then present a deeper analysis of several examples of each myth, chosen for their particular salience, as well as examples of the myth's embodiment in ritual form and moments in which the myth was subverted.

The Myth of Good and Evil

Framing

The myth of good and evil describes the idea that those who break the law are fundamentally bad and the institution of policing is fundamentally good. Justice-involved people—who are often racialized Others—are characterized not as simply bad, but as inherently, unchangeably wicked (Beckett, 2022; Haney, 2020). As the logic goes, people who break the law are fundamentally different from “the rest of us” who live “conventional” lives. Indeed, justice-involved people are often intensely othered by the media and by other generators of cultural discourse, as evidenced by widespread comparisons between them and monsters, demons, animals, and other figures with subhuman status (Haney, 2020; Wall, 2021). They are thought to be deviant in other ways as well—they are shown to be lazy, slovenly, hypersexual, or crude.

The police, on the other hand, are characterized not only as good but as competent, professional, and family-oriented. The choices of police officers are always justified because their motives are aligned with the good. The function of the police within this construction is to maintain all sense of goodness within a society by engaging in an ongoing mythic battle against the forces of evil, in which good will always win out in the end.

The myth of good and evil makes up part of the thin blue line mythology because it is used as support for a cultural image of justice-involved people as dangerous predators. The police can then use this image to naturalize the coercive, often violent power they exert over those they hunt, capture, question, and kill (Wall, 2021). In Wall's (2020) words, "the most minor transgressions or unruliness circulate as bestial threats to social order, with police tasked with identifying, containing, and eradicating these threats in ways that reverse the predator/prey relation: police must become predators themselves" (p. 322). This construction has a salient effect on the public. If they believe that all those who break the law are brutal, unrepentant, fully willing predators, they will be more willing to cede power to the police in the name of self-protection, side with police in moments of conflict, and support harsh treatment of justice-involved people.

Effectively, the myth of good and evil is the result of taking the American myth of rugged individualism and applying it to crime. In a culture that believes each person is fully responsible for their own successes or failures regardless of their background, their environment, or any other social factors, the logic follows

that each person would then be fully responsible for all decisions they make, including decisions to break the law. Rather than looking to social factors to determine a justice-involved person's motives or level of culpability, "all bad choices are viewed as willful and selfish, ones pursued in presumably conscious disregard of the hurtful consequences they may have for others" (Haney, 2020, p. 18).

In addition, the dichotomy drawn between good police and evil lawbreakers mirrors the dichotomy drawn by the manifest destiny myth between good settlers and evil indigenous people. As mentioned, the settlers' role in the manifest destiny myth is as agents of God's will. They are thus associated with perfect goodness, and all of their actions in "carrying out God's will" are considered to be justified. The earliest U.S. colonists also associated the Native Americans explicitly with evil. Hughes et al. (2018) note that the "Puritans believed that Satan ruled the wilderness areas of the world and its inhabitants," meaning that they "viewed Native Americans as agents of Satan" (pp. 42-43). Though the earliest Puritans and the settlers of the frontier were not the same people, it is clear that this cultural logic persisted; the frontier settlement project was inspired at least in part by the perceived need to proselytize the indigenous inhabitants of the frontier (Hughes et al., 2018).

The good and evil myth is a particularly narrative myth; the clash between good and evil is one of the most basic stories told by human beings from time immemorial, as seen in the problematic discourse of manifest destiny. It is not

surprising, then, that this myth is frequently expressed in fictional crime media (Bowling et al., 2019; Crank, 2016; McVey, 2022; Meimaridis & Quinan, 2022; Pautz, 2016; Welsh et al., 2011). Films, television shows, and other sources of fictional media tell simplified stories populated by archetypal characters.

Meimaridis and Quinan (2022) give the following description of such media:

These series present the police as the normative power, authorized to use excessive force to restore order and harmony in society. They are positioned as the armed branch of the state. Situated as the “good”, the police function in relation to the “other”, the criminals, whose perspective will only be shown when their criminal actions are investigated. These actions are the result of the criminals’ individual failures. In institutional police series, the criminal is typically an individual with moral deviations, and the evils inflicted on society result from his/her dishonesty, disdain for norms, or even sadism. The offender is portrayed as dangerous and capable of carrying out his/her illegal actions again if they escape arrest. There is a need for an immediate response, which the police deliver since its use of force is authorized as a necessary measure for the protection of ordinary citizens. Criminals are dehumanized for their transgressions and shown as people who have rightfully lost their civil rights as a result of their immoral deeds. (p. 122)

Echoing Manning (1977) and Loader (1997), Meimaridis and Quinan (2022) go on to label such media forms as “morality tales that society reproduces as a way of reassuring itself” (p. 118). They argue that a public need exists to see “justice” enacted, even onscreen, and thus public attraction to police films and television shows “lies in its ‘ritual affirmation of the potency of law and order’” (p. 118). The myth of good and evil performs this task by telling morally simplistic stories about crime and punishment.

In the Sample

Of the three myths discussed in this chapter, the myth of good and evil is the most salient, or most frequently portrayed, myth across the sample.

Throughout the films in the sample, police officers are portrayed as heroic forces for moral good; lawbreaking people who are opposed to the police are shown to be aligned with evil and destruction.

The most common and most obvious way in which this myth is promulgated is through name-calling, or verbal assignation of signifiers, by police characters in the films. The phrases “good guy” and “bad guy” are used to refer to cops and justice-involved people, respectively, in at least eight films—*Training Day*, *Den of Thieves*, *Righteous Kill*, *Street Kings*, *Pride and Glory*, *The Departed*, *S.W.A.T.*, and *Lakeview Terrace*. These phrases are essentializing in character; they reduce the characters they describe to solely their occupation as a police officer or solely their status as a lawbreaker, classifying them as either

fully “good” or fully “bad” people as a result. The shorthand use of the words “good” and “bad” in this way carries with it the underlying logic that the choice to be a police officer automatically means one is a fundamentally good person, while the choice to break the law automatically means one is a fundamentally bad person.

Interestingly, this precise convention is explicitly referenced during a conversation in *The Departed*. Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon), a cop, is on a date with Dr. Madolyn Madden (Vera Farmiga), a psychologist. Madolyn treats cops, and she and Colin first meet in an elevator at police headquarters. On their date, Colin and Madolyn are trading small talk to get to know each other, and he asks about her work life. He asks her if she also does probation work, and she responds that yes, she sees “violent offenders.” Colin rephrases her words with the simple comment: “Bad guys.” She disagrees, and replies, “That’s one way to look at it. Not necessarily.”

Going beyond a simple assignation of “bad,” many police characters (who audiences are often meant to sympathize with) use language indicating that the justice-involved people they oppose are vicious and subhuman, and therefore undeserving of respect and dignity. Alonzo (Denzel Washington), a police officer and one of the two main characters of *Training Day*, refers to various justice-involved people as “a bag of shit,” a “vile bastard,” and “wolves.” This is contrasted against the police officers he discusses throughout the film, who he calls “a good guy,” “a good cop,” or “the good guys” and describes as “doing

good in the real world.” This same contrast is made by police characters in *Righteous Kill* when they refer to the justice-involved people they kill “scum” while a fellow officer is described as “a righteous man” and “a hero in these filthy lands.”

In *Street Kings*, drug dealers are termed “monsters” and “animals,” and one character notes that “if they can’t fuck it, rob it, or kill it, they don’t want it.” Extending the metaphor that labels those who break the law as animals, a police character in *Street Kings* identifies “hold[ing] back the animals” as the express purpose of law enforcement. Similar language is used in *Pride and Glory* when one police character refers to those who commit crime as animals, adding that it is the job of police to “tour the sewers” and thus symbolically connecting justice-involved people with rats.

A more extreme version of the same logic is present when those who break the law are compared to literal forces of evil. In *End of Watch*, the criminal characters that the police protagonists are tracking are nicknamed “Demon,” “Wicked,” and “Big Evil.” In *21 Bridges*, “looking the devil in the eye” is a repeated verbal motif. Early in the film the police protagonist character’s mother encourages her son to keep doing the important work of “looking the devil in the eye” by facing down those who commit crime, and the protagonist himself repeats this same phrase later in the film. Even more blatantly, in a voiceover at the beginning of *End of Watch*, one of the police protagonist characters describes his beat as the place “where the forces of good fight the forces of evil.”

A similar sentiment is presented in *Street Kings* when a police character reflects on another police officer's confrontation with criminal characters by saying "you went toe to toe with evil and you won." This kind of extreme dehumanization valorizes police violence, depicting it as a necessary response to the heightened level of threat that monsters, vicious animals, or evil forces pose.

In addition to being expressed in a straightforward manner through dialogue, the myth of good and evil is also commonly promoted by the association of police characters with traditionally wholesome images such as warm homes and loving families, while justice-involved characters are associated with images of deviance and squalidity. In films such as *End of Watch*, *Pride and Glory*, and *Training Day*, white cop characters are shown in beautiful, neat middle-class homes kissing their wife and young child(ren). These scenes are then contrasted with scenes portraying a group of black or Hispanic justice-involved people in a dirty, rundown drug house or apartment building partying with loud music, barking dogs, drugs, alcohol, and scantily-clad women. Such scenes take advantage of the biased, negative cultural associations connected with poverty, nonwhiteness, and non-heterosexuality, using these traits as conceptual shorthand to project moral decadence onto characters who hold them.

The first type of scene, showing the police officer and his family, portrays a life of conventional morality. The officer is enjoying precious off-the-clock time with his "respectable," "desirable," often white nuclear family. These scenes are

clearly meant to rouse sentiments of identification and respect. They are often shot in close-up on the faces of the officer and his family members, a cinematographic technique that inspires empathy in the viewer. Bright lighting and sweet, calm piano or string music are often used to further contribute to a sense of the good and the pleasant. A strong example comes when the white cop protagonist of *Training Day* begins and ends the film in his beautiful suburban home with his loving wife and new baby, worlds away from the horrors he is subjected to during his harrowing day training to be a narcotics officer in Los Angeles.

In contrast, the second type of scene, which showcases the living situation of the justice-involved characters, portrays a life that feels perverse and out of control to the conventional viewer. These scenes are often filmed using long pans or sweeping drone shots that both leer at and look down upon the luridness of their subjects. Pounding, bass-heavy music is used almost universally—diegetically to indicate disruptive, irresponsible partying and non-diegetically to induce feelings of oppressiveness and fear in the viewer. Light is nearly always dim to the same effects, though it is sometimes punctuated by harsh, unflattering blue or white light. The camera tends to highlight numerous, scattered bottles of alcohol, drug-related smoke clouds and syringes, as well as non-white women who are often dancing and are nearly always scantily clad. In the case of *Pride and Glory*, these are literally the only women who are sexualized through on-camera nudity during the film.

In *End of Watch*, sexuality is portrayed in exactly this way during a house party scene. Women clad in bras and low-slung underwear dance on the roof of a party house for the viewing pleasure of ogling men at the party. The scene is made further “deviant” by the presence of a lesbian gang leader who sexually demeans women at the party in the same way as the men, at one point asking a young girl to sit on her lap while she bribes her for sex with cash.

This image is contrasted with the sexuality portrayed by the two cop protagonists and their wives/girlfriends. After the party scene, one couple is shown celebrating at a family party and then making love privately in an apartment with soft, gauzy focus, warm lighting, and a romantic soundtrack. Figure 4.1 below depicts this scene, contrasting it with the aforementioned party scene. Later in the film, the pregnant wife of the other protagonist is shown tipsy at a wedding giving sex tips to another woman to her husband’s bemusement, and the moment is played off as cute and funny rather than predatory or repulsive.

End of Watch also uses editing technique to emphasize the contrast between good and evil. Scenes of horror and depravity caused by the justice-involved people the cop protagonists, partners Brian (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Mike (Michael Peña), are hunting are continually intercut with precious moments in the two protagonists’ personal lives. Brian and Mike discover a group of starving, naked trafficking victims in a back room of a dilapidated drug house, and the viewer witnesses Mike’s baby being born immediately after in a bright, joyful



Figure 4.1. Contrasted images of sexuality in *End of Watch*

hospital scene. During a later chase scene, Brian and Mike's peers suffer horrific injuries in a dark alley surrounded by trash and barking dogs, immediately followed by a scene depicting the jubilation of Brian's wedding.

The same editing technique can be found in other films throughout the sample. In *Pride and Glory*, the opening scene shows the cop protagonists playing a joyful, lighthearted game of football and hugging their cheering families after the game. Immediately following is a scene in which the police get called to a dark, rundown apartment building where their suspects live. The justice-involved inhabitants are drinking heavily and doing drugs in dark and unsanitary environs while the gang leader's girlfriend walks around naked. Later, when the police forcefully enter the apartment, the same woman runs down the building's stairs with her rope flapping open, exposing her bare breasts. This scene follows one in which the cop protagonist's family is having a warm, peaceful holiday dinner in a bright, beautiful house while lush classical music plays. These editing choices pit the safe, loving family life of white officers against the dark, deviant environments of nonwhite characters on the other side of the law.

Echoing the wholesome, Americana mythos of *Pride and Glory's* opening football game, sports are again used as a signifier of good contrasted to evil in *Righteous Kill*. During a voiceover scene, Turk (Robert DeNiro), one of the two main police characters, notes that the job of the police "is keeping the 99% safe from the other 1%" and bemoans the "clueless" nature of the populace they protect. As he discusses these two groups—the conventional public and those

who prey on them—two images flash on the screen. First, he imagines or remembers himself at a kids' softball game, representing the wholesome goodness of the alliance between the police and the “innocent”; second, he looks over at a group of young, nonwhite men harassing a woman on the subway, representing the “criminal element” that threatens that goodness. These contrasted images are displayed in Figure 4.2 below.

Aside from dialogue and contrasted associations, another way in which the myth of good and evil is portrayed in the sample is through the exaggeratedly heroic and exaggeratedly villainous actions of the two sets of characters. In several of the sample's films, the police perform the bravest and most morally upright deeds imaginable, while those on the other side of the thin blue line commit extremely atrocious and morally offensive crimes.

The police protagonists in *Street Kings* are characterized in this way, as being allied with the most innocent and opposed to the most wicked. The first call for service answered by its police characters sees them rescuing a pair of young girls who have been kidnapped and raped. Over the course of the rest of the film, the cop protagonists work to hunt down two heroin dealers who were previously involved in what another officer describes as a “rape-mutilation caper.” The officer describes the situation as “a three-day hostage fest with this cute little Guatemalan chick that they snatched up when she was walking home from dental school.” This narrative, meant to justify why the police are so intent to



Figure 4.2. Stereotyped images of “good” and “evil” in Righteous Kill

find the drug dealers, conjures the public nightmare of a hardworking, attractive young woman kidnapped, raped, and brutalized by predators. The police are thus morally glorified, or characterized as extremely good, through their alliance with an ideal victim and their opposition to those who have victimized her.

However, the most potent examples of this stereotyped characterization can be found in *End of Watch*. The film's two cop protagonists, partners Brian and Mike, are shown to be heroic in the most stereotypical way possible. They save children, who are ideal victims due to their cultural association with innocence and goodness, in not one but two different scenes. In one of the film's climactic moments, they literally rescue babies from a burning building and then receive a Medal of Valor. Earlier in the film, they enter the rundown home of a black family and find that the crack-addicted parents have tied up their young children and left them in a closet for an extended period. Here, the characters opposed to the police are pathologized through the doing of an unnatural and arguably incomprehensible deed. Brian and Mike, who act as the audience surrogates throughout the film, only show condemnation and disgust; there is no intellectual or emotional mitigation offered despite the fact that the parents' actions are informed by the illness of addiction. The morality of the scene is displayed as purely black and white.

The brutal extremes of the closet scene are exceeded later in the film when Brian and Mike enter a suspicious house, one that is similarly dilapidated and foreboding to that of the black parents. During Brian and Mike's search of the

interior of the house, the camera lingers leeringly over a traditional Hispanic home altar, emphasizing the racial otherness of the inhabitants. The officers then find out, to their horror, that the inhabitants have hacked several human bodies to pieces, leaving them in blood-filled pits in a hidden room off the kitchen. The camera does not shy away from revealing the most gruesome details of the shocking tableau. The audience is left no room to doubt that those opposed to the police are anything but monstrous evil.

Interestingly, though the viewer of *End of Watch* is clearly meant to side with Mike and Brian, the partners do not always act appropriately or even with good intentions. Early in the film, Mike and Brian are driving to their first call of the day when the scene abruptly cuts to them inside a house, being yelled at by a man. Through dialogue between the three characters, the viewer pieces together that Mike and Brian are responding to a complaint from a mailman who was harassed by the man they are now arguing with. As the argument between the man and the officers escalates, the man, who is black, yells a racial slur at Mike, who is Mexican-American. Mike takes offense, responding with a violent physical attack on the man. A lengthy and vicious fight ensues while Brian looks on with amusement, egging on Mike to do more and more damage and smugly remarking that “this is what happens when you fuck with the police.” Eventually the fight ends when the man is beaten to exhaustion.

This scene occurs close to the start of the film, before nearly any character development of Mike and Brian has taken place. At this point it seems

possible to the viewer that the film they are watching is about bad cops who abuse their power. As the film begins to make narrative and filmic choices that generate a sense of audience alignment with Mike and Brian, it becomes clear that this is not the case, making the fight scene feel incongruous. However, an attentiveness to ritual provides a throughline connecting the scene to the film's larger project of police valorization.

Before the physical fight breaks out in earnest, Mike takes off the tactical belt he wears as part of his uniform. This action has an obvious, concrete purpose. The belt is likely to get in Brian's way, and he probably does not want his gun to discharge accidentally. However, in a perplexing gesture so quick as to be nearly unnoticeable, he also removes his badge. The badge is unlikely to fall off during the fight, as it is probably affixed with a strong metal magnet or a safety pin. Indeed, it is not common to see police officers removing their badges before getting out of their car to pursue a suspect, for example. That there is no practical benefit to be had from the removal of his badge in that moment reveals it as ritual, or symbolic action.

The badge is a potent symbol of the institution of policing. More specifically, its individual identification function makes it a deeply personal object, one emblematic of an officer's own belongingness to the institution. The badge carries all of the meanings that mainstream culture bestows upon policing, such as honor, bravery, and sacrifice. Mike's ritualistic shedding of the badge, in which he physically, spatially separates himself from it, thus achieves a symbolic

separation between the institution of policing and the harmful and clearly unjustified act he is about to commit. In essence, Mike is performing a purification ritual, meant to preserve a sacred thing from pollution. His ritual performance is analogous to images of a cheating spouse removing a wedding ring or flipping down a family photo before engaging in extramarital sex. Through his badge removal ritual, Mike steps out of his role as a representative of the larger institution, symbolically disconnecting his violent act from it and preventing its degradation.

The underlying logic of this ritual, that the institution of policing can be polluted by an association between wrongdoing and the badge, is repeated in another film—*21 Bridges*. The protagonist of *21 Bridges* is an NYPD (New York Police Department) detective named Andre Davis (Chadwick Bozeman). Near the end of the film, Andre confronts the crooked captain of another precinct about ongoing corruption that Andre has unearthed within the captain's unit. Captain McKenna (J.K. Simmons) then attempts to dissuade Andre from publicly incriminating him and his squad. He argues that exposing their illegal drug trafficking and the deaths that have resulted from it will only serve to undermine the public's faith in the NYPD. The precise language he uses is that "that blood cannot be on the badge."

McKenna's claim that he wants Andre to protect the institution from association with wrongdoing or "badness" is clearly self-serving and therefore insincere. However, his statement corroborates the message of Mike's ritual—

that even when individual officers commit misconduct, the mythic connection between goodness and the institution of policing can remain intact. These instances of ritual separation between individual and institution, whether actually carried out or simply called for, reinforce the myth of good and evil.

Rituals following this logic appear across the sample when police officers separate from the policing institution in meaningful ways. A nearly identical sequence occurs in *Pride and Glory* when the film's protagonist, a police detective named Ray (Edward Norton), prepares to engage in a climactic physical altercation with his brother-in-law Jimmy (Colin Farrell), a fellow NYPD officer who has recently been outed as corrupt and has become dangerous. Before Jimmy and Ray begin their brawl, Jimmy takes off and sets down his badge.

Since Jimmy has been identified as a serious threat that must be contained, Ray's violent physical opposition to him does not run contrary to the ethos of policing; a purification ritual is not necessary for the same reason it was for Mike. However, policing is effectively the family business for Ray and the other major characters of *Pride and Glory*, and a major theme of the film is the connection between family and law enforcement work. The questions of identity and morality raised by the film are related to both family and policing in a comingled way; the shared calling of policing is presented as the source of a doubly sacred bond between the sons, fathers, and brothers who belong to the Tierneys, the film's central family. As a result, Ray's physical violence against a

character who is both a fellow officer and a family member is blasphemous. The film does present Ray's climactic fight with Jimmy as the necessary (though weighty) moral choice. However, the fight's effective severing of their sacred bond necessitates a purifying separation between it and the policing institution, which Ray accomplishes by ritualistically removing his badge.

Subversion

Though the previous discussion of purification ritual has already debunked this idea somewhat, the natural cultural subversion to the myth of good and evil would seem to be the narrative of a deviant or corrupt cop. This narrative is indeed present in many of the films across the sample. Fictional officers throughout the sample commit harmful and illegal actions for money, as in *21 Bridges* or *Sleepless*; for power, as in *The Departed* or *Street Kings*; or in service of their goal to capture or kill those they deem to be harmful to society, as in *Shaft* or *Righteous Kill*. The previously discussed officers in *End of Watch* commit misconduct due to anger or insulted pride. Sometimes, like in *Lakeview Terrace*, there is no clear explanation given.

There are also examples of cop antiheroes in the sample. These characters are in many ways unlikable, and though they are not outright corrupt, they are willing to toe the line of procedural propriety. Perhaps the most archetypal example is "Big Nick" O'Brien (Gerard Butler), the lead detective and central character of *Den of Thieves*. Nick is characterized as brash, willingly

intimidating, and thoroughly irreverent. In his first scene in the film, he contaminates an active crime scene by entering it, picking up a donut left on the ground, and eating the dirty donut. This type of behavior then continues throughout the rest of the film.

Further scenes inform the viewer that Nick is hard partier with a troubled home life. The viewer also observes Nick repeatedly using his intimidating reputation and manner to exert domination over others, both inside and outside of work. He cruelly intimidates his daughter's teenage date on prom night and later storms into his ex-wife's home uninvited to bully her new partner. Nick then pulls the same trick again at work while tracking the group of thieves he is making a case against. Inside a hibachi restaurant filled with innocent bystanders, he verbally and physically confronts the group, using fear tactics in an effort to deter them from their planned heist. In short, Nick does not conform in almost any way to the archetypal police protagonist, who typically exhibits conspicuously moral and heroic behavior.

The actions of police antagonists, or antiheroes like Nick, are depicted by their different films as varying levels of justified or unjustified. In each case, these films would seem to be complicating the myth of good and evil by showing a police officer committing harmful or illegal action rather consistently aligning their behavior with the good. However, these portrayals are rarely truly subversive due to a distinction often made between the individual and the institution. For example, take Denzel Washington's Oscar-winning performance as Alonzo in

Training Day. Throughout the events of *Training Day*, Alonzo stages crime scenes, steals, and murders with his squad of corrupt cops. His motivations are multifaceted. Much of his behavior is explained by a need to collect a large amount of money quickly to pay a mafia debt. However, he also clearly enjoys wielding power over others and states a belief that police should not be restrained by the limits of the law when carrying out their duties.

Alonzo's foil in the film—as well as the audience surrogate—is Jake (Ethan Hawke), an officer new to narcotics who Alonzo is training to join his squad. At the beginning of the film, Jake sees Alonzo's deviance as questionable but excusable. As the film goes on, Alonzo's behavior becomes more and more alarming until it is clear to Jake that Alonzo is willing to do any amount of harm (including murder) for the sake of self-preservation. Alonzo's actions become truly unjustifiable, and he becomes a bona fide antagonist who must be stopped.

Near the end of the film, it is established that Jake will bring Alonzo to justice using evidence he obtains during a climactic showdown between the two characters. Thus, the correction to the legitimate problem of police corruption that Alonzo presents comes from within the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) itself. Alonzo and the other members of his squad have certainly “gone bad.” However, Jake's status as the force that wins out in the end, in direct opposition to Alonzo, symbolizes the efficaciousness of the policing institution to continue bringing about the good. In other words, Alonzo is the evil exception, while Jake is the good rule.

This logic, that the institution of policing is willing and able to be the ultimate corrector of police misconduct, persists even when the effective agent of the corrupt police antagonist's downfall is not a police officer themselves. In *Lakeview Terrace*, for instance, corrupt officer Abel Turner (Samuel L. Jackson) attempts to scare his new neighbors out of the neighborhood using increasingly illegal and harmful means that culminate in murder. The character most directly opposed to Abel is his neighbor Chris (Patrick Wilson), who is not a police officer. Chris' decisions to investigate Abel and ultimately confront him physically are the direct catalysts of Abel's downfall. However, the film shows that Abel is not effectively stopped, and the story thus cannot end, until other police officers arrive and fatally shoot Abel. Thus, just as in *Training Day*, the aberrant problem that Abel and his corruption present is ultimately corrected by the institution of policing, thereby maintain the institution's status as a mythically good force.

Both *Training Day* and *Lakeview Terrace*, as well as other films in the sample, present "bad apple" narratives in which one isolated officer or one isolated unit is solely responsible for the police corruption problem. This fact raises the question of how a film might handle *systemic* police corruption, which logically cannot be solved by the institution itself in its thoroughly degraded state. *Fruitvale Station* hints at this, and utterly breaks the myth of good and evil, by portraying a true incident of police brutality that resulted in Oscar Grant's (Michael B. Jordan) wrongful death at the hands of an Oakland BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) police officer.

The film spotlights Grant rather than the police, devoting most of its runtime to a portrayal of his last day on earth before he is killed by Officer Ingram (Chad Michael Murray), meant to represent real-life officer Johannes Mehserle. Grant is the protagonist of *Fruitvale Station*, and the film's clear intention is to humanize him despite his statuses as ex-con and current marijuana dealer. His death, depicted in the film's climax, is represented as a horrific tragedy committed by a menacing, predatorial police officer. Thus, the lawbreaking character is portrayed as essentially good, though flawed, while the main police officer character is portrayed as the committer of a racist and unquestionably evil act. The myth of good and evil is clearly broken here, but the small scope of the story does not allow the film to comment on whether Grant's murder resulted from widespread, systemic police corruption or was instead a tragic exception. The latter is, of course, the idea promoted by the thin blue line mythology.

Another film in the sample, *The Departed*, depicts the former situation, a policing world irredeemably shot through by corruption. The major narrative at the center of the film concerns two mirrored characters: Colin Sullivan, a corrupt Massachusetts state police officer secretly working for local Boston crime boss Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson), and Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio), a member of Costello's crime syndicate secretly working undercover for the Massachusetts state police. The film follows the two men, each a "rat" or "mole" for opposing organizations, as they ascend the ranks of their employers and provide inside information to the opposition.

Notably, *The Departed* takes great care to equivocate the state police and the underground crime mob in the viewer's mind. The interchangeability of Sullivan and Costigan is emphasized in cross-cutting scenes in which Sullivan performs similar tasks for the police as Costigan performs for the mob. As the two play out their mirrored roles, moral lines become blurry. Sullivan, the dirty cop, eventually decides to "go clean," as he can no longer handle the stress of potentially being found out by the police. Costigan, on the other hand, must continually try to prove himself to the mob through violence that he cannot help but internalize, particularly given his lineage as the son of a late mob lieutenant.

Beyond Sullivan and Costigan's individual journeys, moral greyness is present at the institutional level as well. The state police are depicted as pervasively corrupt, so much so that the issue is clearly out of the department's control. Every individual officer is out for themselves, and all must be looking over their shoulders—for captors in the case of crooked cops, and for betrayers in the case of straight ones. But even the straight cops, those who are not in the pocket of the mob, are utterly unscrupulous. Costigan indicates this fact when he remarks that many Boston cops only became police officers to get the opportunity to "bang a n*****'s head against the wall." To make matters worse, everyone wants to claim the credit for bringing down the mob; the cutthroat competition between local, state, and federal agencies as well as between the undercover and non-undercover units of the state police engenders both deception and disregard for procedural justice.

The world of *The Departed*'s cops and gangsters is an anomic and paranoid world. A "rat" is always around the next corner, and neither personal nor professional identities carry certainty or stability. Over the course of the film, the characters repeatedly cross moral boundaries in the viewer's mind, such as when mob boss Frank Costello's status as an FBI informant is revealed. By the end of the film, nearly every major character ends up dead at the hands of the other side, essentially canceling out any strategic or moral ground gained by either the mob or the police during the course of action. Fittingly, the film ends with a shot of a rat scurrying across a balcony, literalizing the paranoia and amorphous morality that lingers on even after so many of the film's characters have been killed.

Overall, the thoroughly ambivalent morality (perhaps even amorality) of *The Departed* stands in stark contrast to the black and white moral schemas present throughout much of the sample when heroically good cops oppose "monstrously" evil lawbreakers. A comment Frank Costello makes to his young protégé Sullivan early in the film perfectly sums up *The Departed*'s subversion of the myth and good and evil. Frank quips: "When I was your age, they would say you can become cops or criminals. Today what I'm saying to you is this... when you're facing a loaded gun, what's the difference?"

One final, brief example of subversion, one that is a bit more straightforward, can be found in *Brooklyn's Finest*. The nature of the relationship between two characters in the film, cop protagonist Tango (Don Cheadle) and

drug dealer Caz (Wesley Snipes), runs counter to the myth's logic. Tango is an NYPD detective who has been working undercover in local drug rings for years. In this capacity, and many years before the start of the film, Tango met a drug dealer named Caz Phillips. Tango came to deeply respect and care for Caz despite his status on the other side of the law. When the film begins, Caz has recently been released from prison, but federal law enforcement agents are eager to reincarcerate him as soon as possible.

The viewer learns early on in the film that Tango has tired of the stresses of undercover work and desperately wants to be promoted to an office job within the NYPD. He receives this very offer by a federal agent, who will ensure he gets promoted if he is willing to set up Caz in a drug sting operation. Tango is disgusted by the idea but reluctantly agrees. After several days of being plagued with guilt for the betrayal of his friend, Tango decides to tell Caz the truth and help him avoid getting arrested again. Tragically, Caz is killed by a local gangster shortly thereafter.

Besides Oscar Grant in *Fruitvale Station*, Caz is the justice-involved character in the sample who is granted the most nuanced and sympathetic treatment. Tango's deep love and respect for his friend, combined with the fact that Caz's death is depicted as a genuine tragedy, humanizes Caz as a complex person worthy of being treated with dignity. There is a sharp distinction between this and the monstrosity and evil with which characters on the other side of the law are typically portrayed.

The Myth of the Beleaguered Professional

Framing

Supplementing the previous myth's ideas that the institution of policing is fundamentally good and that police are heroic, the myth of the beleaguered professional describes what the work life of an officer looks like. Police work is characterized as arduous and extremely dangerous, yet police are understood to be highly successful in performing their crucial role (Branch, 2021; Kappeler & Potter, 2018; Linnemann, 2022; Seigel, 2018; Wall, 2021; Wilt, 2022). The myth of good and evil underpins this idea by creating an image of a dangerous world populated by unrepentant, monstrous predators that could attack at any moment. The myth of the beleaguered professional maintains that police officers are in constant jeopardy because they are so often placed in high-octane, life-or-death situations such as raids, shootouts, and dangerous rescues. Representations in fictional media, which show police engaging primarily in this type of activity and emerging as the victors, are a major source of this myth's reproduction.

The most important ideological function of the myth of the beleaguered professional is that it can be used to insulate the police by justifying any action a police officer decides to take during a confrontation with a member of the public. This function is especially salient in the context of police-caused assaults or killings. As Wall (2021) explains, a widely-held public belief that police are in constant danger prompts justificatory questions like "what choice do police have?" or "what else could they have done?" The myth of the beleaguered

professional gives the benefit of the doubt to the officer by “back[ing] the populace into postures of grateful deference” (Seigel, 2018, p. 6). As the logic goes, each member of the public should be thankful to the police for doing this difficult and dangerous job, one that they could never understand, rather than questioning their decisions on the job.

In its logical reliance on the idea that those who break the law are dangerous predators, this myth has the same connection to American individualist myth as the myth of good and evil. However, it has a unique commonality with the myth of manifest destiny. Within the myth of manifest destiny, one dimension of the valorization of the frontier settlers is their bravery in the face of the dangerous, difficult, and unknown. Part of why they are considered heroic and good is that they willingly put themselves in jeopardy to carry out God’s plan in service of future Americans. The same link between danger and goodness is present within the beleaguered professional myth, in the context of police work.

In the Sample

The major premises of the myth of the beleaguered professional are that police work is an arduous burden for officers to shoulder and that despite this, officers are highly competent at performing their crime control function. In the sample of films, this myth is promulgated in several different ways: by highlighting the dangerousness of police work, by emphasizing that the work is

still worthwhile, and by depicting police officers as competent professionals who “do their job” successfully by catching the lawbreaker or solving the case. Most of the films in the sample do at least one or two of these things.

Across the sample, daily police work is often portrayed as high-octane, high-stakes, and extremely perilous. In some films, this is accomplished through a focus on highly specialized units—a SWAT team in *S.W.A.T.*, a hostage negotiation team in *Inside Man*, or undercover officers in *Miami Vice* or *The Departed*. In many such films, no other type of policing is portrayed that could provide a possible point of comparison. The viewer is left with the impression that this uncommon, specialized work is what policing consists of.

However, even the work of low-level patrol officers is depicted in this way in the sample. *Black and Blue* follows a rookie patrol officer who witnesses multiple murders, has a hit put out on her by a local drug kingpin, and uncovers a widespread police corruption plot—all during her first week on the job. Similarly, the beat cops at the center of *End of Watch* engage in gunfights and high-speed chases throughout the film, and they are instrumental in taking down an international cartel cell. In one scene depicting a call that originates as a welfare check on an elderly woman, Brian comments that “not every call is a foot pursuit or car chase,” but this statement is not at all corroborated by the film’s portrayal of Mike and Brian’s typical day on their beat. Brian’s point is even further muddled when their “simple” welfare check call results in the duo’s discovery of a hidden pit full of dismembered bodies—the film’s most luridly dramatic tableau.

The dangerous and difficult nature of police work within films across the sample is also commented on directly by the films' characters. In *S.W.A.T.*, one character remarks that recruits are attracted to police work because of the ability to carry a gun; he asks a SWAT team member if he would have even joined had the work not been dangerous. The dangerous and demanding nature of the work is also discussed in the context of misconduct, as almost a justification for it. Detective Ludlow (Keanu Reeves), the protagonist of *Street Kings*, believes that police work is so grueling that it is impossible to perform it effectively without breaking the law. Ludlow openly admits as such to the captain overseeing internal affairs for his department: "I know you want my scalp nailed to your wall, but then who's going to do where the law won't?... You going to clean up the needles and baby parts? You need me. All you company men hate me, but you need me."

A similar belief is espoused by Ray, the protagonist and audience surrogate of *Pride and Glory*, when a journalist confronts him about a squad of crooked cops that includes Ray's brother-in-law Jimmy. The journalist accuses Ray and his posse of covering up their misconduct in a recent investigation, claiming that they were "protecting their own and burying the truth." Ray deflects the accusation, saying: "Don't talk to me about the truth. You've got no idea what it takes to do what we do." Echoing Ludlow's comments, Ray suggests that police misconduct is understandable precisely because the job of policing is so difficult. As the logic goes, police officers have to make hard decisions on the job,

and sometimes this necessarily involves stepping outside of accepted procedure. Ray also contends that those same officers should not be prevented from doing their job as a result of their behavior.

Across the sample, cop protagonists like Ray and Ludlow are consistently shown to triumph over their opponents despite the danger and difficulty they face. In *Training Day*, *Righteous Kill*, *Lakeview Terrace*, *Black and Blue*, *Brooklyn's Finest*, and *Pride and Glory*, and *Assault on Precinct 13*, one or more corrupt officers are caught or killed by "good cops" representing the policing institution at large. In *Mystic River*, *Miami Vice*, *Street Kings*, *21 Bridges*, *S.W.A.T.*, *End of Watch*, *Shaft*, *Sleepless*, and *Den of Thieves*, the police protagonists capture or kill their adversaries on the other side of the law, those who have committed the film's central crime or crimes. Many of these adversaries are members of international criminal organizations.

Slight deviations from this trend of police success can be seen in *Inside Man* and *Miami Vice*. *Inside Man* centers on a bank robbery that escalates into a hostage situation, which must be then managed by the NYPD. Throughout most of the film's runtime, the central antagonist is thought to be Dalton Russell (Clive Owen), the leader of the robbery plot. However, as Russell's motives for the robbery slowly become clear, the viewer learns that the "real" antagonist is Arthur Case (Christopher Plummer), the bank's founder and board president. Case, an extremely rich and powerful man, made his fortune by collaborating with the Nazis during World War II. The bank robbed by Russell and his team contains

Case's safe deposit box, in which he has hidden diamonds stolen from Jewish Holocaust victims as well as documents connecting him to the Nazis. Russell and his team wish to expose Case through the robbery.

This film deviates from the myth of the beleaguered professional slightly because the NYPD fails to kill or arrest any of the antagonists by the end of the film. Looking deeper, though, it is clear that Russell's escape does not break the myth. Case has been shown to be the "truly evil" character in the film, and the police are no longer interested in Russell. Case's continued freedom is would ultimately break the myth. Despite the fact that Case is not apprehended during the film's course of action, the final scene makes clear to the viewer that the police have the information they need to apprehend him soon. Therefore, the police are still portrayed in a manner that highlights their power and the likelihood of their success; the myth remains intact.

Miami Vice, Michael Mann's filmic adaptation of his iconic 1980s television procedural, performs similar work to bend, but not break, the myth of the beleaguered professional. As in *Inside Man*, the morality of *Miami Vice* is greyer than in films that straightforwardly portray the myth of good and evil. *Miami Vice* centers on two Miami police detectives, Crockett (Colin Farrell) and Tubbs (Jamie Foxx), who are working undercover to infiltrate a Colombian cartel's international drug trafficking operation. During the course of their investigation, Crockett and Tubbs meet Jose Yero (John Ortiz), leader of the cartel, and

Isabella (Gong Li), an advisor and lover of Yero's boss. Crockett and Isabella then fall in love despite being on opposite sides of the investigation.

In *Inside Man*, bank robber Russell is technically a “bad guy,” but Nazi sympathizer Case is a “badder guy”—an incarnation of “real” evil. Similarly, Isabella is technically a “bad guy” since she works for international drug traffickers, but she is shown to be largely a victim of circumstance. In addition, her status as a gendered romantic object further complicates the situation, leading to a sort of paternalistic protection of her by Crockett. Yero, on the other hand, is portrayed as the “badder guy,” a ruthless criminal who is intent on doing whatever is needed to ensure the continued success of his drug operation. *Miami Vice* drifts a bit from the myth of the beleaguered professional when Crockett lets Isabella go free at the end of the film, as the police have thus not captured everyone involved in the criminal plot at the film's center. However, Yero, the “truly evil” character, is killed by Crockett and Tubbs. Therefore, the police are still successful at getting their man, leaving the myth unbroken.

Though the police are represented as nearly universally victorious across the sample, this victory does not always come without cost. Indeed, the death of a “good” police officer is a frequent narrative occurrence in the sample's films. When such an event takes place, it is often followed by the highly symbolic and highly meaningful ritual of a police funeral. Funerals of police officers appear in at least five films in the sample—*21 Bridges*, *End of Watch*, *Pride and Glory*, *The Departed*, and *Street Kings*—always in the form of dramatic, expressive rituals.

The ritual form and its attendant imagery are consistent across these depictions. In each film, a police officer killed in the line of duty is honored in a church ceremony with heartfelt eulogies and/or in a cemetery burial with a rifle salute. Typical funeral imagery such as flowers, weeping mourners dressed in black, a framed photo of the deceased, and a casket carried by several men are present. Other images unique to funerals of police officers are also present, such as U.S. flags, bagpipers, a sea of blue uniforms, and a procession of police cars. Images from across the sample that are characteristic of these rituals are presented below in Figure 4.3.

The funeral of a fallen officer killed on the job serves to reinforce the myth of the beleaguered professional. This myth tells the story that the job of a police officer is a dangerous and extremely difficult one, and that police will prevail despite this setback. The cop funeral corroborates this first point simply by its very existence. Publicizing and commemorating the fact that a cop has been killed on the job takes this rare event and amplifies it, using a single, emotionally powerful story to anecdotally corroborate a larger narrative of danger and difficulty across the profession.

The emotional resonance already present in the event is heightened through sub-rituals that lend a sense of gravitas, such as the 21-gun salute, or poignancy, such as the eulogy with its rhetorical valorization of the deceased, or

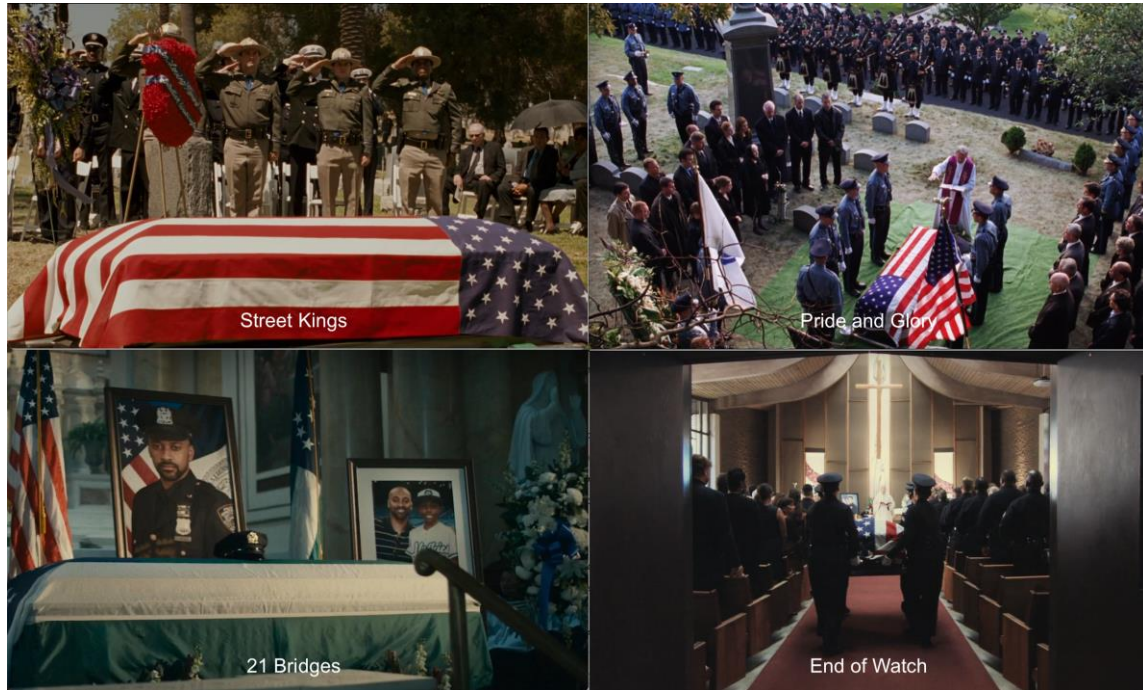


Figure 4.3. The police funeral ritual across the sample

through those that borrow the inherent power of other potent symbols, such as the presentation of the U.S. flag to the widow. The cop funeral ritual, in all its solemn ceremony, taps into the emotions of its observers to bring forth a sense of gratitude. Ultimately, it asks its observers to be attentive to all that the police are willing to do for them.

Despite its grandiosity, the cop funeral is a symbolically vulnerable moment for the institution of policing as a whole. In practical terms, it represents one individual point of failure, one moment in which the enemies of the police have “won.” This vulnerability is clearly unacceptable for an institution engaged in the endless, related projects of self-valorization and public assurance. It must be countered. The ritual of the cop funeral counters this sense of weakness and defeat by reinforcing the myth of the beleaguered professional, specifically the tenet that the police always win in the end.

Recall the purification ritual accompanying the myth of good and evil, in which an officer removes their badge before engaging in an action that would pollute the institution. That ritual accomplishes its symbolic work by instilling a fundamental separation between individual and institution. The ritual of the cop funeral does very similar work in its enactment of the myth of the beleaguered professional. His photo, the eulogy highlighting his personal attributes, and the spotlighting of his family all serve to emphasize the individuality of the deceased officer. On a cinematographic level, cop funeral scenes always included tight facial close-ups of the loved ones, both personal and professional, as they

mourned. This technique stresses the enormity of the individual loss and heightens the ritual's emotional impact, as discussed above.

However, the commonality of all the other, living officers present is also heavily emphasized in cop funeral scenes. Every such scene in the sample featured an attending congregation of hundreds of police officers clad identically in blue uniforms. Without exception, the camera marvels at this sea of blue, showcasing it in wide shots from above and sometimes sweeping across it as if in awe. These shots provide both visual and thematic contrast to the facial close-ups of the fallen officer's family and friends. Rather than mourning the individual loss, the image of hundreds of blue bodies moving in unison and united for a common purpose represents the solidarity and authority of the institution that remains behind. It is a show of force, a communication that there is ubiquity to the power of the police even when one member is gone. This a crucial point of reassertion in a moment when the institution experiences symbolic precarity. The contrasting images of the mourner and the sea of blue are pictured below in Figure 4.4.

Subversion

As evidenced, most of the films in the sample promote the myth of the beleaguered professional by depicting police work as dangerous and difficult and showing police as victorious against their foes anyway. One film in the sample subverts this myth by making opposite arguments on both counts. In its telling of

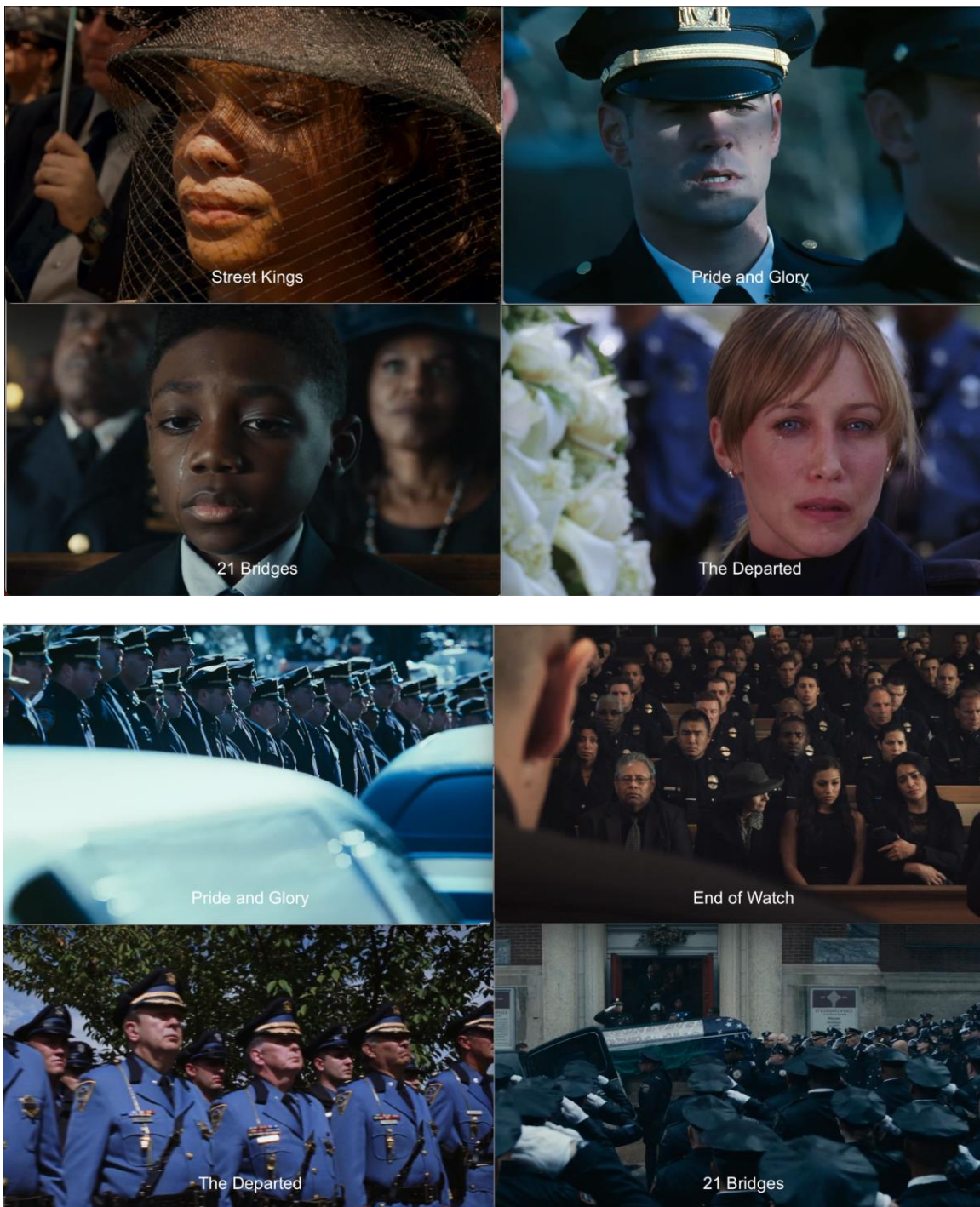


Figure 4.4. Contrasting funereal images across the sample: mourner close-ups vs. seas of blue

the true story of a serial killer case the police have never been able to solve, *Zodiac* depicts police work as slow, frustrating, and ultimately futile.

About halfway through the runtime of *Zodiac*, the screen goes black and remains that way for over a minute. Though no images are shown during this sequence, a soundtrack of 1960s and 70s period music and news headlines plays over the scene. The audience hears mention of the Vietnam War and its attending controversy, the Manson murders, the Watergate scandal, the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa, and the Son of Sam murders. When images reappear on the screen again, the narrative has skipped ahead four years from the scene before the blackout. This sequence masterfully captures the disillusionment, paranoia, and fatalism that pervaded U.S. culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the time period depicted in the film. This mood permeates the broader film and its themes, including its depiction of police work.

The myth of the beleaguered professional tells us that policing is a difficult job because of the high level of danger that accompanies police work. In many of the sample's films, this idea is reinforced through the high-octane action that officers, including beat cops, see in their day-to-day work. In *Zodiac*, on the other hand, police work is depicted as extremely slow and methodical, even dull. The unsolved case at the heart of the film is based on the real-life case of the Zodiac serial killer who terrorized the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1960s and 1970.

The case is headed up by lead SFPD (San Francisco Police Department) detective Dave Toschi (Mark Ruffalo), a real person on whom the characters of Bullitt and Dirty Harry were allegedly based, and his partner William Armstrong (Anthony Edwards). Rather than engaging in shootouts, car chases, and raids, Toschi and Armstrong spend most of their worktime simply talking to other people. They make endless phone calls to different departments to coordinate information, and they visit countless homes and workplaces to question people who might have information about the case. At one point, the partners discover a lead that seems like it might lead to a break in the case. When Armstrong asks Toschi what he wants to do next, Toschi tellingly replies: “make some phone calls.”

In the film, SFPD’s Zodiac investigation takes place in earnest over the course of three years, between 1969 and 1971. During this time, leads develop very slowly and often terminate in dead ends, to the mounting chagrin of the police. Toschi and Armstrong have a seemingly never-ending pile of information to sift through, including thousands of tip calls and hundreds of people falsely claiming to be or know the Zodiac killer. The film makes it clear that this needle-in-a-haystack work is banal and tedious, frustratingly so for the cop characters who must complete it.

One revealing sequence shows a series of quick-cutting facial close-ups of different people who have come to the station to give information. The first, played for comic effect, is a middle-aged black woman who attempts to confess

to the Zodiac killings despite a deep ignorance of basic case facts and an appearance that does not remotely match any descriptions of the Zodiac killer gathered by police. The other tipsters are similarly ludicrous, and the detectives get visibly exasperated as they must continue talking to more and more of them.

A similarly-edited sequence earlier in the film portrays Armstrong making a series of quick-cutting phone conversations to other departments in the region. He is attempting to coordinate an information sharing process between cities and counties that all have disparate evidence regarding the case, but he continually encounters bureaucratic roadblocks, such as several departments not owning fax machines. Similar to the tipsters sequence, Armstrong's tedious work and his growing irritation with it are used for comic effect.

In both sequences, the function the officers are performing is discussing often-lurid details of a highly important serial murder case. However, the audience is made to understand that in some ways this is simply a day job that is frustrating like any other, or perhaps even *more* frustrating due to the lack of answers that three years of work have resulted in. When his most promising suspect, Arthur Leigh Allen (John Carroll Lynch), is eliminated via handwriting sample, Toschi, fully exasperated, admits to his boss: "I can't tell if I wanted it to be Allen so bad because I actually thought it was him, or if I just wanted this to be over." In *End of Watch*, Mike and Brian stumble upon every clue they need to solve their cartel trafficking case without even trying. In *Zodiac*, by contrast,

Toschi and crew fail to put the pieces of their case together despite thousands of hours of fine-tuned investigative work over years.

Another crucial element of the myth of the beleaguered professional is that police are successful at solving crime and neutralizing their opponents despite the difficulty of the work. Indeed, this success is what makes the danger and difficult worth facing. In nearly every film in the sample, the police catch and stop the characters that oppose them, whether they are drug cartel members, murderers, thieves, or corrupt cops. One of the most interesting elements of *Zodiac* as a filmic object is its reversal of this trend, that it is a police procedural film about a case in which police procedure did not result in a capture of the central killer or even an ascertaining of his identity.

The film never really attributes this utter lack of success to one person or institution, but the police are also not depicted as being particularly talented. The aforementioned jurisdictional squabbles between different regional departments hamstring the investigation on multiple occasions, and procedural errors repeatedly cause heartbreaking near-misses. After the third Zodiac killing, beat cops in the area are told to look for a black man before eyewitness testimony confirms that the suspect is definitely white. This leads a pair of officers to drive right past the likely killer as he leaves the crime scene, rather than stopping him for questioning. On other occasions, crucial, time-sensitive information is said to “get lost in the shuffle” or simply fails to be communicated to the right people.

The combination of the tedious work and the case's lack of apparent solvability creates a picture of policing as emotionally destructive to those working on the Zodiac case. After all leads have been chased and the flow of new information has been dry for some time, Armstrong informs Toschi that he will not be returning to work the next day. He has requested a transfer away from the homicide unit in favor of a desk job at the department. Toschi is understanding; the moment is played with a complete lack of judgment or any sense of righteous anger at Armstrong for abandoning his post. The film presents Armstrong as a serious and moral character throughout, and his decision is depicted as a natural one given the circumstances. Within the logic of the myth of the beleaguered professional, the job of policing, though difficult, is always worth it because the work is exciting and the success is encouraging. *Zodiac's* portrayal of our society's policing function is subversive in its depiction of ground-down cops suffering in an occupational world that is both banal and ultimately fruitless.

The Myth of Us versus Them

Framing

The myth of us versus them holds that members of our society can (and should) be divided up into sets of social in-groups and out-groups based on their relationship to crime and the criminal justice system. One dimension of the myth separates justice-involved people from the rest of society. This first separation makes an assumption granted by the myth of good and evil—that those who

society labels as “criminals” are fundamentally bad in a way that “the rest of us conventional people” are not. Therefore, a sharp line of demarcation is drawn between people who are “capable” of crime, especially violent crime, and those who are not (Beckett, 2022; Garland, 1993; Welsh et al., 2011).

This dimension of the us versus them myth functions similarly to the myth of good and evil in that it enables othering of justice-involved people, thereby limiting empathy and making harsh punishment of them more culturally palatable. It also promotes the status quo by encouraging members of a society that acts of crime do not mean there is something fundamentally wrong with their society. Welsh et al. (2011) touch on this aspect when they argue that the “act of constructing violent offenders as ‘predatory outsiders’ and violent crimes as ‘invasions’... allows society to distance itself from these crimes” and “construct violence as stemming from the domain of others” (p. 464).

A second dimension of the myth separates police from everyone who is not a police officer. This second separation makes an assumption shared by the myth of the beleaguered professional —that police shoulder a heavy societal burden that no one else in society can empathize with. This assumption draws a line of demarcation between people who can understand and do what must be done to protect society and people who cannot and do not (Baker, 2021; Boivin et al., 2020; Bouza, 1990; Crank, 2016; Doherty, 2016; Kappeler & Potter, 2018; Linnemann, 2022; Smith & Natalier, 2004). The separation leads to “police holding negative attitudes about citizens,” (Boivin et al., 2020) both law-breaking

and law-abiding. Police see justice-involved people as dangerous predators and more “conventional” members of society as naïve and often ungrateful.

This dimension of the myth obviously creates a culture of solidarity between police officers, but it can also be responsible for blatantly deleterious effects. The police can develop a militarized mentality towards their work, seeing “civilians as the enemy rather than members of their own community” (Doherty, 2016, p. 450) and increasing the likelihood that officers will behave in an escalated manner when interacting with the public. The us versus them perspective also reinforces the so-called “code of silence,” in which police officers overlook violence or misconduct committed by fellow officers and refuse to report it (Bouza, 1990; Crank, 2016). Naturally, this practice encourages the continuation of abusive and even deadly behavior by cops, particularly in the case of repeat offenders.

In essence, this second facet of the myth of us versus them rhetorically locates officers as separate from, or outside of, the rest of their community. The myth and the worldview it elicits encourage them to see their work as a war *against* the community rather than a participatory effort to make the community better and safer.

In the Sample

As established, the myth of us versus them marks two major divisions between people. The myth separates “criminals” and “non-criminals,” as well as

police and non-police, into discrete groups that are pitted against each other. Characters across the sample draw, reinforce, and discuss these divisions, which they often believe to be uncrossable. Many such instances are verbal and are revealed to the audience through conversational dialogue. However, attendant rituals are also present, further revealing the existence and consequences of characters' belief in the myth.

The first tenet of the myth of us versus them is that there is a fundamental division or difference between those who society labels as "criminals" and those who do not carry this label. These labels are fairly arbitrary, as most people breaks the law on a semi-regular basis; actions such as exceeding the speed limit, downloading movies or music from the internet, littering, jaywalking, or even using illegal drugs like marijuana are all extremely common practices. However, as discussed in reference to the myth of good and evil, a cultural image exists about what a "criminal" looks like and does. This stereotype and cultural belief in it are illustrated well in a scene from *Lakeview Terrace*.

Midway through *Lakeview Terrace*, Abel Turner, the corrupt cop antagonist of the film, visits his wealthy neighbors' house for a party. The party is attended by the host couple's similarly wealthy and suburban friends. While Abel chats about his work with the group, one woman expresses her displeasure with the manner in which local police officers interact with citizens. She remarks, "I just find that there's an attitude. You know, a kind of aggressiveness when you deal with them, which I can certainly understand."

What the woman means is that she thinks police officers should treat the “criminals” they interact with on the job with more respect, though she understands why they don’t because “those people” are unpleasant, ill-mannered, or aggressive themselves. She uses the signifier “them” to refer to “the type of people” that police interact with, to whom she attributes negative characteristics. This group is in contrast to “us,” who make up a fully separate class that behaves differently.

A similar sentiment is shared in a more philosophical and less condescending way by a cop character in *Mystic River*. *Mystic River*, set in a blue-collar neighborhood of Boston, follows the murder of a local teenager and the subsequent police investigation. At the beginning of the investigation, the Massachusetts State Police detectives handling the case, Detective Devine (Kevin Bacon) and Detective Powers (Laurence Fishburne), visit the victim’s parents to gather information about the night she was killed. They talk with the victim’s father, Jimmy Markum (Sean Penn), who is a childhood friend of Detective Devine and formerly served a prison sentence. After the detectives leave the Markum home, Detective Powers mentions, “Your pal Markum, the moment I laid eyes on him I could tell he’d done time.” Powers’ observation is somewhat tossed-off, not even sparking further conversation. However, it showcases a belief in the myth of us versus them, specifically the idea that there is a fundamental difference, one rising even to the level of visibility, between those who serve time in prison and the rest of society.

This first dimension of the myth of us versus them is also visible in the sample in the form of ritual. As illustrated by the badge removal ritual connected to the myth of good and evil, many human rituals are related to the making and preserving of boundaries. In the case of the badge removal ritual, a boundary was drawn between the policing institution and an unjust act. In many of the sample's films, another type of boundary—a physical and geographic one—demarcates the space belonging to “criminals” from the space belonging to “conventional” people.

In instances in which the myth of good and evil is illustrated in the sample, those opposed to the police are often depicted as living in dark, dingy, rundown neighborhoods. Films such as *Black and Blue*, *End of Watch*, *Pride and Glory*, *Righteous Kill*, *Street Kings*, and *Training Day* all adhere to this narrative practice. Many also follow a related filmic convention in which the camera sweeps forebodingly across the dark neighborhood, while suspenseful music and off-putting diegetic sounds put the viewer on edge. The message delivered by these scenes is that this is a place to fear, a place the viewer does not want to go. This type of shot, which functions essentially as an establishing shot, also serves as a spatial transition for the viewer. The audience is told that they are leaving the safety of the previous setting and entering a new one occupied by people who are more frightening and more dangerous from those seen in the film thus far.

A particularly salient example can be found near the beginning of *Black and Blue*. Officer Alicia West (Naomie Harris), the film's protagonist, is a rookie cop at the New Orleans Police Department. Eager to help her new partner, Alicia pulls a double shift to fill in for him. She is assigned to patrol the city with Officer Deacon Brown (James Moses Black), who is unfamiliar to her. Alicia and Brown are eating dinner at a diner when Brown receives a call for service. The scene transitions to several quick cuts meant to represent the detectives' movement through the city. The viewer sees long-distance, overhead aerial shots of Brown's cop car traveling across two bridges before the cops reach their final destination—a rundown warehouse sporting graffiti, broken-out windows, and a barbed-wire fence.

During the aerial shot of the second bridge, the camera shifts slightly to show the warehouse where the detectives end up. The location is isolated on the other side of a large river that is spanned by the bridge. At this point in the sequence, the music picks up noticeably, becoming loud and droning with a militaristic drumbeat as Alicia and Brown move closer to the warehouse. The intended message is clear; the detectives are exiting one zone and entering another, wholly separate one. They are performing a ritual crossing-over, leaving behind safety and passing into the dangerous war zone of the “criminal underclass” that is relegated to the opposite bank of the river. The officers' ritual passage is depicted in clockwise fashion in Figure 4.5 below.



Figure 4.5. Ritual passage from the realm of the “conventional” to the realm of the “criminal” in *Black and Blue* (clockwise)

The sacredness of the mythic boundary between criminality and conventionality is highlighted in another film in the sample—*Pride and Glory*. *Pride and Glory* tells the story of the Tierneys, a family of men all serving in the NYPD. Jimmy Egan, the brother-/son-in-law of the Tierney men, is a corrupt cop involved in drug dealing and murder. As mentioned in connection with the myth of good and evil, the sacredness of family is a major theme of the film. Numerous sets of scenes across the film contrast the two separate realms of the officers' lives; their work lives are dark and brutal while their lives with their families are wholesome and sweet. The character of Jimmy experiences an even more extreme distinction due to his crooked behavior at work.

During the film, the viewer is made to understand that Jimmy has remained successful in his illegal activities for so long by drawing a sharp boundary between work life and family life. This boundary facilitates the maintenance of extreme secrecy about what he does on the job. The extent of Jimmy's boundary work becomes glaringly obvious during a scene in which this boundary is violated. The scene begins with the tender, domestic image of Jimmy and his family playing in the snow in their backyard. A joyful Jimmy plays football with his young daughter and lovingly kisses his wife. When the family returns inside to warm up, Christmas decorations are visible in their cozy home. Then the doorbell rings.

Jimmy's wife answers the door to find a young Latinx man she clearly does not know. Jimmy steps in front of her and quietly hisses, "What the fuck are

you doing here, Casado? Get around back. Now.” When his wife asks him who the man is, Jimmy is visibly uncomfortable and replies that “he shouldn’t be here... I’m gonna get rid of him,” before scurrying to the backyard. From the details of the conversation that happens next, it becomes clear that Casado (Rick Gonzalez) is a part of the criminal gang that Jimmy is involved with. The two argue about money and about a job Jimmy is supposed to do for the gang before Jimmy chases Casado off the property. Jimmy becomes more and more incensed during the argument, which culminates in Jimmy threatening Casado: “If I see you come around here again, anywhere near my house, anywhere near my fucking family, if you even mention a word about my kids and wife again, I will kill you.” When Casado responds by cursing at Jimmy in Spanish, Jimmy yells, “Get that fucking dirty-ass fucking monkey language out of my fucking yard.”

Jimmy’s extreme response to Casado’s visit to his home is fundamentally the result of boundary violation. It is crucial to Jimmy that his work life, particularly his corrupt activity, is kept separate from his family life. In other words, Jimmy’s criminal activity is confined to a wholly distinct area of mental, emotional, and physical space. His home, on the other hand, is a different place, a sacred one where his innocent family lives and all his attachments to conventionality reside. When Casado, who represents criminal otherness, crosses over into this sacred dwelling of all that is denoted by the traditional family, a primal symbolic threat to Jimmy’s ritualized boundaries is made. In performing this pollutive crossing, Casado makes visible to the viewer the

boundaries drawn by the myth of us versus them—the boundaries between the criminal and the conventional.

In addition to dividing society along lines of “criminality,” the myth of us versus them makes a second partition between police and non-police. Throughout the sample, in films like *Black and Blue*, *Pride and Glory*, *S.W.A.T.*, *Lakeview Terrace*, *End of Watch*, and *21 Bridges*, the institution of policing is advanced as a key locus of identity for those who belong to it; it fundamentally separates police from others. As the logic goes, the occupation of law enforcement has such unique demands, and necessitates such an insular worldview, that police officers are profoundly changed by it. “Civilians,” the word police use to refer to non-police, have not undergone this change and are thus utterly incapable of understanding “what needs to be done” for police to fulfill their social function.

The sheer pervasiveness of this belief among the policing community is a central tension of *Black and Blue*. Protagonist Alicia West is a black woman who grew up in the neighborhood where much of the activity that the police are investigating takes place. She does not seem to fit in anywhere; her fellow officers look down on her sympathy for the justice-involved people in her childhood community, while members of the black community she came from look down on her choice to become a police officer. Alicia straddles two separate worlds: one defined by belongingness to the policing institution and the other defined by their distrust of it. This fundamental division is a vivid illustration of the

separation between police and others that results from the myth of us versus them.

In *Black and Blue*, many of Alicia's law enforcement peers share the belief that being a police officer supersedes any other identity category that a person has. This conviction is illustrated by the metonymic use of the word "blue" throughout the film, when officers refer to other officers as "blues." This use of metonym strips an entire person down to one element—the blue color of their police uniform. One example arises when the topic of Alicia's old neighborhood arises in conversation. An officer comments on the dangerousness of the neighborhood, remarking that "Ww don't respond to calls in there anymore. Not unless there's a blue in trouble." Alicia's fellow officers also use similar language to entreat her to choose between the two sides, contrasting the color of Alicia's uniform with that of her skin: "You think you're black? You think they're your people? They're not, we are. You're blue now." The same metonymic device is used in other films in the sample—*21 Bridges*, *Lakeview Terrace*, and *Shaft*, in addition to its prominent use in *Black and Blue*.

Over the course of the film, Alicia's situation becomes more and more precarious. She becomes the target of a dangerous group of corrupt cops within her department when she uncovers their plot. At the same time, she is being hunted by members of her childhood community, who mistakenly believe she killed three unarmed young men from the neighborhood. In the film's climactic scene, she attempts to escape from an apartment block in the neighborhood,

hoping that the residents will protect her from the corrupt police officers who intend to kill her.

During the ensuing standoff, one of the crooked cops taunts her about her attempted alliance with the black community: “You picked the wrong side. None of them care about you.” His derisive remark mirrors one made minutes before by one of the residents of the apartment block, in an effort to dissuade others from helping her: “She ain’t one of us. She picked her side.” Thus, comments made by both police and non-police characters reinforce the myth of us versus them by conjuring an image of two wholly distinct and opposed groups that Alicia must choose between.

Black and Blue provides an excellent illustration of the existence of the myth of us versus them. Other films in the sample go one step further, illustrating the problematic effects of police adopting the myth as a worldview. The first effect is that when a police officer views all other people as outsiders who stand in opposition to the police, an atmosphere of mistrust and defensiveness can naturally begin to form. This toxic atmosphere can prompt officers to be always on edge, ready to strike at any perceived threats, which then naturally makes police violence and killings more likely.

Shades of this attitude can be observed in the sample when officers assume that “civilians” are uncooperative, or worse, that in their lack of understanding of police work they are no more than an impediment to the important work that must be done. The former sentiment is found throughout the

sample but is best exemplified by a scene in *Mystic River*. In this particular scene, the two lead detectives investigating the central murder case are preparing to question people who saw the victim on the night of her death. Detective Powers sarcastically quips, “In the meantime we’ve got a list of bar patrons, all of whom I’m sure are dying to cooperate with the police.” His sarcastic remark and the frustration underlying it indicate a deep mistrust of, or even a condescension to, the people he is allegedly working to serve.

The latter, more extreme sentiment—that civilians are impediments—is displayed by Turk, one of the two central cop characters of *Righteous Kill*. While riding the subway, he looks around at the people surrounding him and thinks, “They’re clueless. The only ones paying attention on the street are the cops and the criminals. Everyone else is just going somewhere, shopping.” This condescending view reflects a belief that “normal” people are all the same and are fundamentally different from those affiliated with the justice system; they are sheep who are too dumb and oblivious to survive without police.

Another common iteration of this belief is the convention of police becoming frustrated with others’ insistence that they adhere to “unnecessary,” external red tape. At the beginning of *Sleepless*, for example, Jennifer Bryant (Michelle Monaghan), one of the film’s cop protagonists, must attend mandatory counseling sessions after she is almost killed while investigating a meth lab. When her psychiatrist attempts to initiate a therapeutic discussion of the incident, Jennifer snaps at her, yelling: “Can I go do my job? Or do you want to keep

talking bullshit?” The doctor is not a police officer herself; Jennifer believes that she is clueless to the fact that police work is much more important than the “bullshit” psychiatry distracting Jennifer from that work. Jennifer sees her doctor, and mental health in general, as simply obstacles in the way of performing the crucial tasks of the policing institution.

In addition to promoting an unhealthy attitude towards the populace, the myth of us versus them also encourages police misconduct by reinforcing the logic behind the so-called “code of silence.” The code of silence refers to the expectation held by many police officers that if they commit misconduct, their fellow officers will lie about it rather than expose them. This idea is referenced countless times throughout the sample, in films including *Black and Blue*, *Lakeview Terrace*, *Pride and Glory*, *Street Kings*, and *Training Day*.

The code of silence is mentioned obliquely in *Street Kings* when one character derisively describes an Internal Affairs officer as “a cop who burns cops,” implying that the act of investigating police misconduct is dishonorable. In other films, one police officer will communicate an expectation that another adheres to the code. In *Pride and Glory*, Francis Tierney (Jon Voight), the patriarch of the central Tierney family, serves as the NYPD Assistant Chief. When his son, protagonist Ray, brings him information about corruption in the department, he implores Ray to keep quiet to avoid bringing public scandal on the department. He maintains that “anything that makes cops look culpable is no good” and that it is important to “handle this quietly with as little incident as

possible.” Similarly, crooked cop Alonzo of *Training Day* attempts to blackmail his new trainee Jake into remaining silent about misconduct that Jake witnesses.

The sample also includes instances where cops are shown lying in compliance with the code of silence. In one scene in *Lakeview Terrace*, for example, crooked cop antagonist Abel is investigated for excessive use of force. Later, his partner encourages him by saying, “I told them you didn’t touch that guy.” Many of the films in the sample, such as *Lakeview Terrace*, depict the code of silence as a negative phenomenon by associating it with corrupt antagonists. However, it is important to note that the code of silence is undeniably tied to us versus them-related beliefs that are not condemned in the same way, beliefs that are even at times endorsed by the films.

The aspect of the myth of us versus them that draws boundaries between police and non-police is expressed ritually in the sample through a ritual of identification between officers. In this identification ritual, officers use words or body language to identify themselves to other officers as being fellow members of the policing institution. This ritual symbolically communicates an important belief engendered by the myth of us versus them—that both parties are police officer, not civilians, and can confidently trust each other as a result.

The more straightforward instance, in which an officer simply tells another officer “I’m a cop,” occurs frequently across the sample. To give one example, cop protagonist Tom Ludlow of *Street Kings* performs the ritual while he is crouched over the body of his dead partner, who was shot during a robbery. After

the partner is already dead, two other cops responding to the incident enter the convenience store where Ludlow waits with the body. Since Ludlow is not in uniform, the other officers are immediately suspicious of him. They think he could be the man who killed the officer whose body lies on the floor. While they raise their pistols toward him, Ludlow shouts, "I'm a cop! I'm a fucking cop!" The other two then immediately lower their weapons in response. The ritual of identification communicated to the other officers that Ludlow was one of them; it instantly shifted their mindset to trust rather than suspicion, simply because Ludlow identified himself as an officer rather than a member of the public.

A more subtle example in which the ritual occurs nonverbally appears in *Shaft*. The film follows John Shaft (Samuel L. Jackson), the titular antihero cop, as he attempts to take down a rich white man who he witnesses commit a racially motivated murder. During the film, Shaft questions a number of people who were also present during the incident, in an effort to obtain eyewitness testimony. One such person is a woman named Terry (Lanette Ware), who says she is willing to help Shaft if he will do a favor for her in return. She asks him to intimidate a local teenage gang member named Malik (Bonz Malone) into staying away from her young son.

Shaft agrees and approaches Malik. Without any provocation, Shaft brutally pistol whips the young man until he is laying on the ground. At this precise moment, while Shaft is holding his gun against the face of the collapsed and bloodied Malik, a police car with two officers inside drives past. Shaft freezes

very briefly, and the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of his face. For a brief moment he is clearly nervous that the officers will take issue with his brutal attack. However, after exchanging intense eye contact and a subtle nod with Shaft, the officer behind the wheel keeps driving. The deeply symbolic nod exchanged between the two men speaks volumes. In that moment, Shaft cashes in on his long and storied career with the NYPD (especially considering that the film has made it known that Shaft is a famous figure in the department) to communicate a specific message to the other officer, one that seeks trust and understanding. Shaft's nod says: *You, as a fellow officer, know how it goes sometimes in this line of work.* The other officer's nod in response communicates the understanding Shaft is looking for. By ritualistically invoking the myth of us versus them, Shaft successfully evades accountability for his misconduct. This ritualized exchange is shown in clockwise fashion in Figure 4.6 below.

Subversion

In the sample, the myth of us versus them is subverted in two major ways: when justice-involved characters are treated with dignity and respect, and when cop characters view "civilian" characters as collaborative partners rather than treating them with derision or condescension. Neither of these scenarios represents a norm within the sample, so true examples of each are rare. However, *Assault on Precinct 13* does provide powerful examples of both types



Figure 4.6. A police identification ritual in *Shaft* (clockwise)

of subversion, and examples can be found in *Black and Blue* as well. In addition, the films *Inside Man*, *Miami Vice*, and *Fruitvale Station* dialogue with these ideas but do not ultimately present subversive in-film messages in the same way.

To first consider strong examples of myth subversion, we turn to *Assault on Precinct 13*. This film is a 2005 remake of the 1976 John Carpenter film of the same name. It takes place over the course of one night inside the facility of the titular LAPD Precinct 13. The core narrative of the film begins when an intense snowstorm unexpectedly diverts a prison transportation vehicle to the precinct. The officers on duty must protect themselves and maintain control of the precinct while under attack by a squad of corrupt cops, who later arrive seeking to kill everyone in the building.

The group inside the precinct is a motley crew of 3 cops, 2 “civilians,” and 4 prisoners. The leader of the cops is Sergeant Jake Roenick (Ethan Hawke), who is accompanied by Officer Jasper O'Shea (Brian Dennehy) and Officer Kevin Capra (Matt Craven), who arrives at the precinct later in the film. The civilians are two women: Iris (Drea de Matteo), the precinct's secretary, and Alex (Maria Bello), a police psychologist. The prisoners dropped off at the beginning of the film are mob boss Marion Bishop (Laurence Fishburne) and three others named Beck (John Leguizamo), Smiley (Jeffrey Atkins), and Anna (Aisha Hinds). The film's central tension comes from the attempt of entire crew inside the precinct to band together and survive through the night.

When the siege of the precinct begins, Jake's initial plan is for himself and Jasper, the other cop, to fight off the attackers while the civilians remain hidden and the prisoners remain in their cells. Jasper agrees with Jake's plan, particularly around the prisoners; though both cops are wary of the prisoners, Jasper is much more distrusting than Jake. As Jake and Jasper attempt to defend the precinct, Jake quickly realizes that his original plan is not feasible. He rounds up the two civilian women and arms them after teaching them how to use police pistols. This decision represents a first moment of evolution for Jake, who earlier in the film showed a typical lack of respect for both women, one consistent with the us versus them perspective that cops often take toward civilians. Here, Jake communicates to the women that he trusts them, and he treats civilians as collaborative partners in helping fulfill what he understands to be essentially a policing function.

As the group inside the precinct continues to fight the squad of crooked cops, Jake makes another surprising decision to let the prisoners out of their cells and arm them. He encounters impassioned resistance from Jasper, who believes that he and Jake "can't trust these people." Jasper later pulls his gun on the group of prisoners in an attempt to get them to hand over their weapons. When Jake pleads with him that "we all gotta start trusting each other," Jasper shares an even more negative sentiment about the prisoners. "Are you gonna trust these freaks? The first chance they get to blow our brains out, they'll try to make a break for it." Here Jasper epitomizes the us versus them perspective; he

insists that justice-involved people are fundamentally different from the rest of society and are profoundly untrustworthy as a result.

Jake's actions throughout the film continually push back against Jasper's logic in a manner subversive of the myth of us versus them. The decision to let the prisoners out and enlist them to help defend the precinct was certainly self-serving on Jake's part. However, he takes additional steps after that point to treat the prisoners with kindness and dignity. As tensions within the group heighten, Jake asks everyone to "turn over a new leaf" and formally introduce themselves to each other.

This humanizing gesture sets the stage for a later sequence in which the viewer sees quick glimpses of different pairs of characters chatting in a warm and friendly manner. Prisoner Smiley and civilian Alex laugh about astrology. Cop Jake and prisoner Beck share their common experience with drug dependency. Civilian Iris and prisoner Bishop have a deep and vulnerable conversation about sex, death, and personal resolutions. In these scenes, the genuine building of camaraderie and the sharing of commonalities are subversive; there is no us versus them perspective to be found among these characters despite their widely differing social statuses.

One final decision from Jake continues to subvert the myth of us versus them, specifically the facet of the myth that divides police and non-police. Late in the film, the team inside the precinct is losing ground. Jake realizes that part of the group must attempt to escape and get help. Anna, one of the prisoners,

volunteers to try. Jake agrees but insists that she be accompanied by an officer, either himself or Jasper. Alex, one of the civilian women, steps in and offers to go, essentially volunteering to risk her life for the rest of the group. When Jake allows a civilian rather than a police officer to fulfill the film's most crucial strategic task, he fully breaks down the typical barrier between police and non-police erected by the myth of us versus them.

Though *Assault on Precinct 13* arguably provides the strongest examples, moments of genuine subversion of the myth of us versus them also occur in *Black and Blue*. As discussed, many of the officers surrounding cop protagonist Alicia reinforce the myth of us versus them through their words and actions. However, the larger narrative arc of the film, which fundamentally centers on Alicia's effort to balance being black and being a cop, is subversive of this myth.

Throughout the course of the film, Alicia continually rejects the distinction between police and non-police that so many of her colleagues insist on making. This rejection is best exemplified during a heartfelt conversation with a childhood acquaintance who has suspended his suspicion of the police to help her. Alicia shares with him her motivation for joining law enforcement: "I stopped seeing enemies or allies. I just saw people... just folks trying to figure out life like I was... I just wanted to help." Her friend responds wisely that these problems are systemic and are bigger than Alicia. He notes that "food banks and inner-city programs help. These cops out here, not so much. We're just animals to them. Shit's got to change."

Outside of *Assault on Precinct 13* and *Black and Blue*, other films in the sample gesture toward subversion of the myth in a more oblique manner. A major visual motif in *Inside Man* is the disguise the perpetrators of the film's central bank robbery wear to conceal their identities—a black hooded sweatshirt, a white face covering, and black eye coverings. As part of the thieves' plan, they force their hostages to don the same disguises, thus making it impossible for the police to tell the difference between the thieves and the innocent "civilians" trapped inside the bank. The visual match between the thieves and hostages is portrayed below in Figure 4.7, with thieves on the left and hostages on the right. In one particularly poignant scene, depicted in the bottom right quadrant of Figure 4.7, the police shoot at the hostages indiscriminately because they look identical to the thieves.

This visual blurring of the line between conventional person and criminalized Other mirrors other examples of moral blurring that occur in the film, such as police officers' exhibition of racially discriminatory behavior and the development of a certain respect between the cop protagonist character and the mastermind of the heist. However, the film does not fully flesh out these instances into a bona fide subversion of the myth of us versus them. Similarly, the romance arc between *Miami Vice's* Crockett and Isabella, two lovers on either side of the law, gestures toward the idea that the lines between cops, criminals, and civilians are blurry. Yet, the film is interested in a surfeit of other



Figure 4.7. Visual similarities between “criminals” (left) and “civilians” (right) in *Inside Man*

themes; no single scene or set of scenes straightforwardly encapsulates a specific, mythically subversive message.

Finally, the film *Fruitvale Station* is subversive, but its subversion is primarily metatextual. The clear aim of the film is to humanize justice-involved protagonist Oscar Grant; the viewer becomes fond of Oscar over time while observing the mundanity of his daily life. *Fruitvale Station* is highly effective at imbuing Oscar with dignity and worth, a process which then highlights the utter tragedy of his death at the hands of police. The film's effect on the viewer is subversive of the myth of us versus them, as it encourages the viewer to look beyond the oversimplified dichotomy of criminal or non-criminal before judging another person. However, this process happens subtly and in the viewer's mind, rather than in a blatant way onscreen. Thus, as in *Miami Vice*, there is not a particular scene or group of scenes that succinctly communicates mythic subversion.

This chapter has analyzed the presence and subversion in the sample of three major myths derivative of thin blue line mythology. The following, final chapter of this dissertation expands this analysis by focusing on its key findings and implications before sharing brief concluding thoughts.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Key Findings

For decades, the U.S. has been entrenched in a period of mass incarceration; this urgent social justice issue has harmed countless individuals, families, and communities by perpetuating cycles of inequality, exacerbating social divisions, and impeding opportunities for human flourishing (Beckett, 2022). Mass incarceration is intimately linked to policing, as it is largely a result of aggressive law enforcement practices, over-policing of marginalized communities, and enforcement of policies that result in the disproportionate arrest and incarceration of disadvantaged people (Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.). Related, systemic issues within the institution of policing, such as widespread racial profiling and use of lethal force, have led many Americans in recent years to call for meaningful reform or even full abolition of policing in the U.S. (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022).

Cultural criminologists have long maintained that cultural products present in society, such as media forms, contribute to the social injustices perpetrated by the policing institution (Ferrell, 1999; Kappeler & Potter, 2018). More specifically, research within cultural criminology has found support for the idea that elite control of media results in the dissemination of narratives that maintain the status quo, protect the interests of those in power, and shape public perception in a way that minimizes scrutiny of problematic policing practices (Kappeler & Potter,

2018). All of these outcomes inhibit the deep reform that would be necessary to curb the phenomenon of mass incarceration.

Film is a crucial site at which to explore these themes. In order for film to be successful, it relies on the viewer making emotional attachments to its narrative and to the characters that populate that narrative space. It is no surprise that films centered on crime and punishment are so popular, as they deal in the “secularly sacred,” or the ideas and beliefs that are deeply important to what it means to be a member of a human community. In short, films about crime and punishment provide themes that are easy to get attached to. (This same foundational, central nature is also what makes crime myths mythic.)

These themes connect to intimate and deeply-held sentiments around topics such as ensuring personal and familial safety, determining appropriate consequences for those who cause harm or death, and defining the extent of coercion permissible for state agents to enforce legal compliance. Such ideas are being actively worked out in crime film, and the portrayals of police officers, their work, and their antagonists all stake particular claims within these contested territories.

Cultural criminologists have taken seriously such representations and their effects for decades. To meaningfully participate in this vital tradition of scholarship, this study applied ethnographic content analysis methodology to a purposive sample of 20 contemporary U.S. crime drama films centered on police, with a view to unpacking dominant ideological messaging reinforcing harmful

beliefs and practices related to state power. In the finding that such messages exist in popular media, the results of this study are not novel. However, a unique contribution that this project makes is that such messages can be observed in the forms of myth, i.e., the fundamental beliefs of a culture that constitute part of its worldview) as well as ritual, i.e., physical behavior that concretely expresses mythic ideas. Another innovative contribution of this study is that these policing-related myths and ritual are themselves derived from even more central, entrenched myths related to U.S. national identity.

As the Results and Analysis chapter of this dissertation has indicated, the specific findings of this study can be summarized using three major analytic categories, each corresponding to a derivative myth of the larger thin blue line mythology. These three derivative myths—the myth of good and evil, the myth of the beleaguered professional, and the myth of us versus them—are each present in the sample’s films on their own and in ritualized forms. These myths and rituals serve to reinforce the socially harmful thin blue line mythology.

The myth of good and evil characterizes the institution of policing as fundamentally good and those who break the law as fundamentally bad. In the sample, the myth of good and evil was promoted with dialogue that labeled the typically-racialized people opposed to the police as subhuman, monstrous, animalistic, or simply, “bad.” In contrast, dialogue often labeled police as simply “good.” In addition, police characters were associated with wholesome images and settings, while justice-involved characters were associated with deviant or

unpleasant images and settings. Finally, police characters often displayed exaggeratedly heroic behavior while their opponents were exaggeratedly villainous. In ritual form, the myth was illustrated by a purification ritual in which police characters remove their badge before engaging in morally abhorrent behavior, thereby disassociating the policing institution from injustice.

The myth of the beleaguered professional holds that policing is an extremely dangerous and difficult job, and that despite this, police are highly effective at controlling crime. In the sample, day-to-day police work is often portrayed as exciting and high-stakes due to frequent car chases, gunfights, and discoveries of crucial clues that bring down sophisticated criminal organizations. In nearly all the films in the sample, the police persevere through hardships and dangerous work to triumph over their opponents by killing or incarcerating them. In ritual form, the frequent portrayal of the cop funeral served to briefly reveal a chink in the institution's armor before immediately reinforcing it by highlighting the institutional power remaining behind after an officer was killed.

Finally, the myth of us versus them divides society into discrete and opposed groups along the lines of criminal versus non-criminal and police versus non-police. Non-criminals thus see criminals as fundamentally morally different from them, and police see non-police as ignorant and weak. In the sample, the ways that "conventional" people discuss justice-involved people reveal that they see themselves as fundamentally different from people who society has labeled as "criminal"; across the films, police talk about "civilians" in a similarly pejorative

way. These ideas are represented in ritual form as well. Physical, ritualized separations are made between “conventional” space and “criminal” space, and characters cross them in dramatic and violating ways. In addition, police officers identify themselves to each other to ritualistically establish respect.

In sum, the three core myths found in the sample work to divide society into opposing groups, deeming police and civilians as good, criminals as evil, and police work as dangerous and highly effective. All of these ideas feed into the larger thin blue line mythology, the central mythology of policing that casts police as the sole force responsible for ensuring social order over anarchy, as they defend the innocent masses in a war against vicious and evil predators (Wall, 2020).

The finding that thin blue line ideology and its component parts are present in U.S. media is unsurprising, considering that direct lines can be drawn from them to foundational American mythology. The concept of rugged individualism promotes a view that people are fully and individually responsible for what they do, and they should therefore be thought of as wholly “evil” for acts of deviance, regardless of their circumstances. These ideas are clearly mirrored in the myth of good and evil; they are also present in the myth of us versus them, specifically the facet that separates justice-involved people from “conventional” people, pitting the groups against each other. Similarly, the concept of manifest destiny set a precedent for the otherization and demonization of nonwhite people who live differently, the valorization of members of the dominant group who took

on the “dangerous and difficult” task of “dealing with them,” and the justification of any action deemed necessary to accomplish this task. These notions are present in salient form in all three of the core myths.

The sample also contains moments subverting the ideologies promoted by each category of myth and ritual. These subversive moments suggest avenues for disrupting the destructive ideology of the thin blue line. However, as discussed, this finding does not necessarily mean there is a surfeit of truly subversive *films* in the sample; a few subversive moments do not necessarily coalesce into a cohesive, subversive film when each film is viewed as a whole.

In the film *Black and Blue*, for example, cop protagonist Alicia’s quest to humanize and collaborate with the justice-involved people in her childhood community subverts both the myth of good and evil and the myth of us versus them in. However, the film as a whole does not subvert the larger ideology of the thin blue line. As previously noted, one of the most problematic aspects of the thin blue line mythology is its insistence that police (in the form we experience them today) are essential for any semblance of social order to be maintained. *Black and Blue* reinforces this idea by emphasizing the necessity of police work throughout.

In addition, the telling final scene of the film shows Alicia patrolling her old neighborhood in a police car. She smiles while trading thumbs-up gestures with a group of young girls. Though Alicia has brought down the corrupt cops in her department, the film suggests that no additional work is necessary to achieve full

reconciliation between the police and a community that the film had previously portrayed as being both ignored and mistreated by those very same police. These ideas are fundamentally conservative in character, and they ultimately call for a maintenance of the status quo regarding policing and marginalized communities rather than any meaningful change.

The presence of individual subversive moments in films that are otherwise ideologically conservative in nature suggests contradictions within conservative ideologies. Central tenets of conservatism, such as individual liberty and limited government intervention, are in tension with other core values such as traditionalism and law and order. These contradictions are laid bare in a powerful way by the mythology of the thin blue line, through which conservatives champion an expansive and powerful law enforcement apparatus that often infringes upon individual freedoms and civil liberties. This paradoxical support reveals a willingness to sacrifice such freedoms in favor of maintaining order and control, and it reinforces the need for critical examinations of the ideological underpinnings of such conservative ideas.

The one film in the sample that could potentially be called wholly subversive, and which largely manages to avoid the thin blue line's contradictions, is *Fruitvale Station*. Its focus on the final day of Oscar Grant and his murder at the hands of police is a genuinely progressive in how it radically humanizes justice-involved Oscar and explores the racialized issues that led to his death. Unlike *Black and Blue*, *Fruitvale Station* does not contain a neat and

tidy ending that blankets over the legitimate, systemic issues continuing to haunt the institution of policing in the United States.

Implications

As established, a major innovative contribution of this project is that dominant ideological messaging reinforcing harmful beliefs and practices related to state power can be found in popular film *in the forms of myth and ritual*. The natures of myth and ritual suggest several major implications of this finding. First, as explored in this dissertation's Review of Theory and Literature, the mythographic and ritological literatures emphasize the fact that myth and ritual operate below the level of rational consciousness. The ideological messaging contained within mythic and ritualized forms therefore shapes belief in a subconscious or unconscious manner.

It is easy to imagine a viewer watching the sample's films—many of which portray racialized, low-income people as vicious and cruel in the context of the myth of good and evil—and subconsciously developing or reinforcing prejudices toward low-income people or people of color. It is similarly easy to imagine a viewer being more willing to give an officer the benefit of the doubt in a contested police-caused killing situation after watching films that continually and uncomplicatedly align police officers and the policing institution with social good.

If beliefs about the state are being shaped in an unconscious or sub-rational way, this raises concerns for the state of democracy in the United States.

Formation or reinforcement of belief in this way (i.e., without critical examination) perpetuates a one-sided narrative that inhibits open dialogue—and even limits imaginative capacity—about alternatives to the current way the policing institution operates. Put another way, the type of free thought that could potentially lead to challenges of the status quo is significantly constrained by our popular media forms taking a pro-state, pro-police stance by default. This reality should concern even those who are satisfied with the present state of the U.S. criminal justice system.

In addition to their tendency to operate subconsciously or subrationally, a second relevant quality of myth and ritual is their narrative nature. The mythographic and ritological literatures explored in this dissertation highlight the idea that myth is a specific kind of foundational narrative, with ritual serving as mythic narrative's expression in physical action. As discussed by Shanahan and Morgan (2004), narrative is a powerful teaching tool. We learn how to understand the world and operate in it through experience, which is itself a narrative containing meaningful messages instructing us how and why to take certain actions while avoiding others. In other words, the authors argue that narrative is a primary lens through which we form notions about the world. It then follows that myth and ritual, as narrative forms, would be effective inculcators of ideology.

In the context of this study, these ideas bolster the argument that it is important to consider both myth and ritual when interrogating ideological forms present in media. The conservative, pro-state nature of the ideologies present in

popular film, combined with the narrative natures of myth and ritual, could help make sense of why conservative crime and punishment-related ideas are so entrenched in U.S. culture.

Another novel contribution of this project related to the natures of myth and ritual can potentially shed additional light on the salience or “stickiness” of crime and punishment ideology. This dissertation has argued the similarities in the logics of the thin blue line’s derivative myths and the foundational myths of American culture. The ubiquity and historical persistence of the myths of rugged individualism and manifest destiny—as well as the logics undergirding them—show that these myths are intricately woven into the culture of the United States. It follows that other myths based on similar principles (e.g., the thin blue line-derivative myths discussed in this dissertation) would inherit at least some of the staying power of these foundational myths.

Turning now to more practical implications, the proliferation of the study’s three myths, as seen across the sample, can have numerous negative social effects. First, they can contribute to the frequency of police misconduct, particularly misconduct in the form of excessive use of force. The myth of good and evil reinforces a stereotype of justice-involved people as dangerous predators. This rhetoric can help foster an environment in which police officers feel on edge or fearful in the field, which can lead them to act quickly, using excessive force in preemptive self-defense. The myth of the beleaguered professional and the myth of us versus them can bring about similar effects by

encouraging officers to look at their work as more dangerous than it is or to develop a combative, adversarial mindset toward the communities in which they work. This warlike approach can then lead to increased likelihood of racial profiling and over-policing of marginalized communities.

The myths can also obscure or justify police misconduct when it does occur, leading to a lack of accountability on the part of the institution. The myth of good and evil fundamentally aligns police with the good; this assignation can contribute to an environment where critical examination of police behavior becomes challenging. If individuals either inside or outside of the institution of policing are conditioned to grant police officers the benefit of the doubt when facts are in dispute, critical examination of police behavior becomes challenging.

The myth of the beleaguered professional can further contribute to this possibility in its emphasis of the difficulty of police work. For example, the rhetoric that police work is dangerous and burdensome can be used as a mitigating reason to excuse the behavior of—and in turn reduce the accountability of—officers who use excessive force for any reason. Similarly, the myth of us versus them endorses a belief that police officers and civilians are entirely separate and opposed groups in society, which can reinforce the “code of silence” occupational norm that encourages officers to lie to prevent other officers from being punished. Ultimately, these possibilities can hinder efforts to address systemic institutional issues such as police brutality and corruption.

Furthermore, proliferation of the study's core myths can lead to a lack of empathy and understanding for the complex circumstances that contribute to lawbreaking behavior. The myth of good and evil simplistically and uncritically points to inherent, individualized evil of justice-involved people as the explanation for this behavior, ignoring underlying socioeconomic factors, systemic inequalities, and structural social issues. The myth of us versus them displays similar rhetoric in its insistence that justice-involved people and "conventional" people are two inherently separate groups, leading "conventional" people to believe that they are simply morally incapable of lawbreaking behavior. When an attitude of ignorance and prejudice toward justice-involved people is promoted, this can lead to increased support for punitive measures and inhibit a focus on prevention, rehabilitation, and addressing the root causes of crime.

Finally, the myths can foster an overreliance on policing to address issues that the institution is unequipped to handle. The myth of the beleaguered professional—and to a lesser extent, the myth of good and evil—represents police as highly effective at dealing with anything that is thrown at them. This image of nearly-infallible police capability can lead to an overestimation of the abilities of the institution to handle social problems such as mental health crises, substance abuse and addiction, and homelessness. A societal expectation that the police should address these issues can lead to widespread harm of vulnerable and marginalized people.

As evidenced, the fact that the thin blue line-related ideological content in the sample is found in mythic and ritualized forms makes these potential outcomes more likely, as myth and ritual are effective carriers of hegemonic ideology. Their operation below the level of the rational is also relevant here. Rather than presenting their messages via logical argumentation or even through direct emotional appeal, myth encodes them in foundational narratives while ritual infuses them into meaningful physical behaviors. These unique functions boost the salience of the messages carried by myth and ritual, increasing the potential that they will be internalized by audiences, which in turn increases the likelihood that they may then have these social effects.

On a positive note, this study's findings also contain a ray of hope that such negative outcomes may be avoided via disruption of the thin blue line ideology. Though they are far from the norm and rarely coalesce into a fully subversive media form, moments subverting the study's oppressive myths are present in the sample. Lines between good and evil are blurred when films cast doubt on the morality of the policing enterprise or valorize justice-involved characters. Police work is shown as dull and futile through emphases on bureaucratic red tape and unsolved cases. Police characters treat "civilians" as respected collaborative partners, and characters on both sides of the law put themselves in each other's shoes.

These moments provide viewers different ways of thinking about crime and criminal justice that can begin to suggest an escape from the thin blue line

perspective. In small ways, these films challenge the entrenched narratives and ideologies surrounding law enforcement. They highlight the nuanced complexity of criminal justice issues while inviting viewers to question the simplistic dichotomies perpetuated by the thin blue line mythology. In turn, these films model the collective responsibility, care, and empathy needed to foster communities that are vibrant, just, and truly safe. Instead of upholding a status quo that has led to crises of criminal justice and the scourge of mass incarceration, media promotion of ideas that are antithetical to the oppressive rhetoric of the thin blue line would represent a step forward toward addressing these injustices.

As mentioned, there is only one film in the sample—*Fruitvale Station*—that is wholly critical of the policing institution. Standing alone as the single critical film is no small feat, but the film’s messaging begins and ends in that criticism. For a film to fully disrupt the oppressive ideologies surrounding policing, it would need to go beyond criticism and imagine entirely new ways of satisfying the “secularly sacred” concerns for safety and order that loom in the public consciousness. Unfortunately, the results of this study have not provided guideposts for the creation of media forms that are transformational in this manner. In this matter, then, I defer to scholars such as Angela Davis, Mariame Kaba, and Alex Vitale—major contributors to the developing body of literature on police abolition that is focused on such questions.

Limitations of the Current Study and Avenues for Future Research

Though this dissertation has presented critical findings related to the presence and nature of pro-state ideology in contemporary U.S. police film, the specific parameters of the study do result unavoidably in several limitations. First, a major strength of the study is its novel synthesis of many different bodies of theory, including several critical subfields of criminology, cultivation theory, ritology, mythography, and film studies. However, as a result of the breadth of relevant theory and a need to treat each framework with significant depth, other frameworks that would have enriched the project were unable to be included in the study in a formal manner. Chief among these is Critical Race Theory (CRT).

A deep understanding of racial inequality and the power structures, norms, and institutions perpetuating it in the U.S. is essential in order to perform high-quality, critical work on the contemporary criminal justice system, particularly in reference to policing. Along these lines, a formal inclusion of CRT would certainly have strengthened this project, especially in its consideration of state power. However, this was not possible due to theoretical overload. This issue was addressed, though imperfectly, by a heightened attentiveness to race and racial dynamics in the sample during the data collection process. For example, the explication of the myth and good and evil within the Results and Analysis chapter of this dissertation highlights the fact that racialized othering is a major technique in the myth's promulgation.

Moving from theory to methodology, several limitations exist in relation to the study's sample, which is made up of popular crime drama films centered on U.S. policing. As mentioned in this dissertation's Methodology chapter, the qualification of "popular" is important because films that have been widely seen have a higher likelihood of affecting cultural beliefs on a large scale. However, there is no precise way to gauge film popularity in our age of streaming content, as streaming platforms make very little of their viewing data public. Instead, this study utilized theatrical box office data; it is the closest objective measure that can be utilized to approximate film popularity despite not providing the full picture of public engagement with filmic content. This unavoidable discrepancy is likely to be most pronounced beginning in March 2020 due to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on theatrical film attendance. The overall issue potentially affects the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

Sampling within the study could also be susceptible to a small measure of sampling bias. The sampling qualifications of "crime drama" and "centered on U.S. policing" are both subjective, and no reliable sampling frame exists for these qualities, or indeed any of the qualities of film relevant to the sampling process. Due to possible selection bias, certain films with content relevant to the study may have been excluded, potentially exacerbating the comprehensiveness issue. However, steps were taken to reduce the likelihood of sampling bias as much as possible, such as ensuring that the research process informing film selection continued until saturation.

The last limiting aspect of the study's sampling process is that the sample is constrained in terms of both media category and historical period. By focusing solely on films, other potentially highly relevant data such as television shows was neglected. In addition, by focusing on 21st century films, the study cannot account for developments in media representations of thin blue line ideology over time. The decisions to restrict the sample in these ways do limit the study's findings, but they were made in the interest of obtaining a manageable sample for the project.

Another methodology-related limitation exists based on the study's centering of film analysis. Film analysis is fundamentally subjective, as film involves a process of co-construction of meaning between the filmmaker and the viewer. The filmmaker crafts the narrative, cinematography, editing, and sound of a film to convey a specific artistic vision and typically an intended message as well. However, as viewers engage with the film, they bring their unique positionalities, perspectives, emotions, and personal histories into the cinematic encounter. In this process, the filmmaker's intention provides a starting point, but the audience's interpretive agency significantly shapes the ultimate significance and impact of the film. The co-construction of meaning thus transcends any passive consumption of the filmmaker's message, transforming the cinematic experience into a collaborative and interactive encounter.

The supreme subjectivity of this interpretive process affects the replicability of this study, as the unique positionality of each researcher will affect

his or her analysis of the films. However, I have tried to provide enough context for each film, and each particular scene within the films, to allow the reader to critically evaluate whether my interpretations and analyses are valid in context of the overall film.

Finally, an obvious limitation built into the study's methodology is that the research design is purely theoretical, meaning that that the proposed social effects of the study's findings are untested. The specific methodological approach of ECA emphasizes the exploration of symbolic meanings and ideologies within cultural forms. Its validity lies in its ability to uncover nuanced meanings, social dynamics, and cultural influences that can enhance understanding of social phenomena.

For researchers utilizing ECA methodology, a finding that certain symbolic or ideological meanings are present in a text is a highly significant one regardless of the nature or level of their concrete effect. This study is faithful to the ethos of ECA in that its major finding is the presence of the ideological mythic and ritualized forms themselves, not necessarily their social effects. The latter can be suggested, and such suggestions are indeed made in the current chapter of this dissertation, but it is outside the scope of this study to ascertain them in a more formal sense.

This study represents an initial probe into the cultural site where myth, ritual, crime, punishment, and film intersect. The particularity of this site means that it is relatively unexplored and is thus a fertile site for future inquiry. The

results of the current study indicate the value of engaging in the underperformed task of analyzing mythic and ritualized ideological messaging concerning state power, particularly within media forms related to crime and punishment.

With a view to the limitations of the current study, future work could utilize similar methodology while centering a different a theoretical framework, such as CRT or a gender-analytic framework. This revision would allow for a highly nuanced analysis of racial or gender-related dimensions of mythic and ritualized ideologies surrounding policing or other criminal justice institutions.

Alternatively, future work could broaden the sample to other periods of U.S. history or to other forms of media, such as television or news media. ECA offers a versatile approach to investigating the presence of myth and rituals in various cultural products. By examining how different media forms represent and perpetuate myths and rituals related to various social institutions and power structures, scholars can broaden their understanding of the ways media shapes societal beliefs and attitudes. These findings, which would be based on a highly robust analysis of dominant national ideologies related to crime and punishment, could pave the way for critical interventions and media literacy efforts aimed at challenging oppressive ideologies and promoting more equitable representations of social institutions.

A final, intriguing possibility for future research is a similar study that approaches the present topic from an empirical perspective rather than a theoretical one. A research design incorporating survey or interview methods

could generate valuable data on how mythicized and ritualized media representations influence public attitudes towards state power.

Concluding Thoughts

As established, the sample of films for this study includes only those produced in the 21st century. This means that the vast majority of films in the sample were written and produced in the post-9/11 period of U.S. history. The events of 9/11 brought about significant cultural effects in the U.S.; the period 9/11's wake was characterized by a profound, existential sense of vulnerability and fear, a surge of patriotism and national unity, and the emergence of Islamophobia and prejudice toward those connected to the Middle East more generally (Pew Research Center, 2021). In light of these trends, profound support for agents of state power (particularly those with a stated function to protect the public), favorability toward their continued maintenance of that power, and the disparaging of their opponents—all of which are found in this study's sample in mythic and ritualized forms—are unsurprising findings within popular media content of the period.

As discussed throughout this dissertation, the mythographic and ritological literatures tell us that myth and ritual are effective carriers of ideology, particularly hegemonic ideology that is reassuring to the public and conservative in terms of societal status quo. The presence of such ideology is most “necessary” in areas of culture such as crime and punishment that are

permeated with fear and anxiety, and in times such as the post-9/11 period when these fears and anxieties reach a fever pitch. Corroborating these ideas, the mythic and ritualized pro-police messaging in the films of the post-9/11 period robustly presented thin blue line ideology, thus projecting the image of a strong state that could protect its citizens. This image would likely have been desirable in the midst of widespread social uncertainty and volatility; rituals and myths embodying it could project a deeply appealing reaffirmation of social order and stability.

Indeed, evidence of the tactic to present a reassuringly strong state is revealed in post-9/11 policy decisions that dramatically strengthened and conspicuously exerted U.S. state power. The Patriot Act was written and passed, giving the federal government the legal ability to surveil its people on a massive scale. The “War on Terror” was launched, wielding military might against the countries of Iraq and Afghanistan. A prominent security culture was proliferated, justifying even more surveillance, the militarization of law enforcement agencies, and the normalization of a slew of intrusive state practices (Debrix, 2007).

The identification of possible similarities between the media response and the state response to 9/11 is not an effort to argue that the media and the state are in active collusion to disseminate pro-state propaganda with the direct intent of influencing citizens’ perceptions. Rather, I contend that the cultural processes shaping the content of media forms are largely systemic and subconscious in nature. These processes reflect broader social patterns and dynamics, such as

the conservative nature of our institutions that skews them toward maintenance of the existing social order. Media institutions can be influenced by these dynamics, and political, economic, and social pressures or trends can shape their content. Thus, ideological, pro-state filmic content is a result of power-related structural factors and ingrained norms within the media industry rather than coordinated conspiratorial activity (Kappeler & Potter, 2018). Regardless of the precise causal process by which they come to be, the existence of pro-state ideology within media forms remains a valuable topic of research due to its possible social effects.

To consider our current moment, the fear and instability of the 9/11 period are echoed in contemporary events and trends. These include the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental concerns caused by our rapidly changing climate, economic uncertainty in previously stable sectors such as technology, and frequent gun violence in the forms of mass shootings and police-caused killings. If history is any indication, we should expect our media forms to continue, if not heighten, the type of endorsement of strong state power suggested by the ideological, pro-state content present in this study's sample.

A compelling example is provided by the contemporary ubiquity of superhero films, in which strong-willed individuals are given societal permission to enact violence against their opponents in order to enforce the "right and just" moral order. Given the contemporary normalization of misinformation and our related arrival in the "post-fact era," it will be even more crucial for scholars to be

attentive to the presence of myth and ritual in these newer media forms, as myth and ritual are at their most salient when operating below the level of rational consciousness.

Myth and ritual are mysterious things. Like many social forces, they have the capacity to both oppress and liberate. As alluded to in this dissertation, they have been great forces for good in my own life, providing me conduits of connection to myself, to others, and to that which is beyond this life. Completing a project that focuses on their use in the promotion of unjust ideology has thus been a melancholy undertaking in many ways. However, calling for attentiveness to these forces that are so often overlooked in modern life is a crucial effort. A truly just U.S. society, one that does not perpetuate cycles of harm against its most marginalized members by beating, arresting, and murdering them, will never be a possibility unless we work to dismantle all forms of oppression no matter how small—from picture palace to police precinct.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Filmography

21 Bridges (dir. Brian Kirk, 2019)

Assault on Precinct 13 (dir. Jean-François Richet, 2005)

Black and Blue (dir. Deon Taylor, 2019)

Brooklyn's Finest (dir. Antoine Fuqua, 2009)

Den of Thieves (dir. Christian Gudegast, 2018)

Departed, The (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2006)

End of Watch (dir. David Ayer, 2012)

Fruitvale Station (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2013)

Inside Man (dir. Spike Lee, 2006)

Lakeview Terrace (dir. Neil LaBute, 2008)

Miami Vice (dir. Michael Mann, 2006)

Mystic River (dir. Clint Eastwood, 2003)

Pride and Glory (dir. Gavin O'Connor, 2008)

Righteous Kill (dir. Jon Avnet, 2008)

S.W.A.T. (dir. Clark Johnson, 2003)

Shaft (dir. John Singleton, 2000)

Sleepless (dir. Baran bo Odar, 2017)

Street Kings (dir. David Ayer, 2008)

Training Day (dir. Antoine Fuqua, 2001)

Zodiac (dir. David Fincher, 2007)

Appendix B: Sample of Films

This appendix lists the sample of films I initially created before my methodological revision. Films that remained in the final sample after that revision are indicated with bold type.

Film	Director	Year
21 Bridges	Brian Kirk	2019
All Day and a Night	Joe Robert Cole	2020
Animal Factory	Steve Buscemi	2000
Assault on Precinct 13	Jean-François Richet	2005
Bad Boys for Life	Adil & Bilall	2020
Bad Boys II	Michael Bay	2003
Black and Blue	Deon Taylor	2019
Brawl in Cell Block 99	S. Craig Zahler	2017
Brooklyn's Finest	Antoine Fuqua	2009
Dark Waters	Todd Haynes	2019
Den of Thieves	Christian Gudegast	2018
Detroit	Kathryn Bigelow	2017
End of Watch	David Ayer	2012
Erin Brockovich	Steven Soderbergh	2000
Escape Plan	Mikael Håfström	2013
Felon	Ric Roman Waugh	2008
Freedomland	Joe Roth	2006
Fruitvale Station	Ryan Coogler	2013
Inside Man	Spike Lee	2006
Just Mercy	Destin Daniel Cretton	2019
Lakeview Terrace	Neil LaBute	2008
Law Abiding Citizen	F. Gary Gray	2009

Miami Vice	Michael Mann	2006
Mystic River	Clint Eastwood	2003
Pride and Glory	Gavin O'Connor	2008
Righteous Kill	Jon Avnet	2008
Roman J. Israel, Esq.	Dan Gilroy	2017
S.W.A.T.	Clark Johnson	2003
Shaft	John Singleton	2000
Shot Caller	Ric Roman Waugh	2017
Sleepless	Baran bo Odar	2017
Street Kings	David Ayer	2008
The Departed	Martin Scorsese	2006
The Judge	David Dobkin	2014
The Last Castle	Rod Lurie	2001
The Lincoln Lawyer	Brad Furman	2011
The Longest Yard	Peter Segal	2005
The Next Three Days	Paul Haggis	2010
The Trial of the Chicago 7	Aaron Sorkin	2020
Training Day	Antoine Fuqua	2001
Undisputed	Walter Hill	2002
Zodiac	David Fincher	2007

Appendix C: Codebook and Descriptions

This appendix lists the codes I utilized when collecting the study's data, as well as descriptions of each.

Code	Description
Competence	Any mythic or ritualistic content by which police officers are shown to be highly competent or skilled at their job of policing
Competence – Subversion	Any mythic or ritualistic content that subverts the idea that police officers are highly competent or skilled at their job of policing
Danger	Any mythic or ritualistic content by which the profession of policing is shown to be a dangerous job
Danger – Subversion	Any mythic or ritualistic content that subverts the idea that policing is a dangerous job
Domination and Intimidation	Any mythic or ritualistic content by which police officers are shown to dominate or intimidate others
Domination and Intimidation – Subversion	Any mythic or ritualistic content that subverts the idea that police officers dominate or intimidate others

Full Individual Responsibility	Any mythic or ritualistic content by which justice-involved people are shown to be fully responsible for their actions that violate the law
Full Individual Responsibility – Subversion	Any mythic or ritualistic that subverts the idea that justice-involved people are fully responsible for their actions that violate the law
Good vs. Evil	Any mythic or ritualistic content by which police are shown to be purely good or justice-involved people are shown to be purely evil
Good vs. Evil – Subversion	Any mythic or ritualistic that subverts the idea that police are purely good or justice-involved people are purely evil
Moral Superiority	Any mythic or ritualistic content by which actions of police officers are shown to be morally justified simply because of their status as police officers
Moral Superiority – Subversion	Any mythic or ritualistic content that subverts the idea that police officers are morally justified simply because of their status as police officers
Us vs. Them	Any mythic or ritualistic content by which marked divisions are shown to exist either between justice-involved people and others or police officers and others
Us vs. Them – Subversion	Any mythic or ritualistic that subverts the idea that marked divisions exist either between justice-involved people and others or police officers and others

Appendix D: Final Mythic Categories and Descriptions

This appendix lists the final analytic categories derived from the study's data collection process as well as their descriptions.

Mythic Category	Description
The myth of good and evil	The idea that those who break the law are fundamentally and the institution of policing is fundamentally good
The myth of the beleaguered professional	The idea that the role of police is a very difficult and dangerous one, but officers are nonetheless highly capable of fulfilling it
The myth of us versus them	The idea that members of our society can and should be divided up into sets of social in-groups and out-groups based on their relationship to crime and the criminal justice system

VITA

Alexandra Szmuto, née Pellegrino, was born in Littleton, Colorado and graduated from Bartlesville High School in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. She then attended the University of Dallas in Irving, Texas, where she earned a B.A. in Politics with a concentration in Legal Studies in 2011. After working in both the United States Congress and the nonprofit sector, Alexandra enrolled in graduate school at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas, where she earned an M.S. in Criminology & Criminal Justice with a concentration in Theory and Research in 2019. The same year, she began work toward a Ph.D. in Sociology with a concentration in Criminology and a certificate in Social Theory at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Her research interests lie in the intersection of myth and ritual, cultural criminology, and film. Alexandra and her husband Carl live in Austin, Texas.