Book and film review: L.A. Confidential - A novelist and a filmmaker discover corruption everywhere

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2 April 1998

What is the current fascination with the police all about? Or, to put it more concretely, what is one to make of a book and a film that are prepared to admit the most horrendous things about cops, but still encourage a reader or a spectator to share such a fascination?

James Ellroy's crime novel, *L.A. Confidential* (1990), is a fast-paced and self-consciously raw work about Los Angeles in the 1950s. The book deals with the efforts by a number of Los Angeles policemen, over the course of five years or so, to solve a mass killing at an all-night coffee shop. Three cops—Bud White, Ed Exley and Jack Vincennes—are at the center of the investigation. Despite conflicting ambitions and motives, they ultimately join forces to solve the crime, or to avenge it. Along the way, they dig up an endless amount of dirt—involving pornography, drugs, connections to organized crime and brutal murder—on fellow cops, movie stars, businessmen and politicians.

Ellroy has become something of a big name in novel-writing. He has modestly referred to himself as "the greatest crime novelist who ever lived." He gets by on tough-guy dialogue, short declarative sentences, complicated plots and sub-plots, and lots of violence. He also seems to be tapping into a hostility toward what is known as "political correctness." His books are full of racial and ethnic epithets. Whether he is criticizing or celebrating the backwardness he presents remains an open question.

Ellroy has had lots of problems in his life. His mother was murdered in 1958, when he was 10 years old. He became an alcoholic and drug user at a fairly early age, as well as a petty criminal. In his autobiographical *My Dark Places* (1996) he recounted his efforts years later to uncover the facts of his mother's killing.

The novelist recently told an interviewer, "I am a 49-year-old white man, basically conservative in temperament. I am Protestant to the core. And I would rather err on the side of authority. I respect cops much more than I dislike them.... And I understand the passion of men who need to impose authority on other people because their inner lives are chaotic." He added, "My guys are the toadies of the fascist system. To me, that's crime fiction in the twentieth century."

Here is a typical Ellroy passage, describing a group of L.A. police beating up six Mexicans, accused of assaulting fellow officers, in holding cells. "Cops shoved cell to cell. Elmer Lentz, splattered, grinning. Jack Vincennes by the watch commander's office—Lieutenant Frieling snoring at his desk. Bud [White] stormed into it. He caught elbows going in; the men saw who it was and cleared a path. Stens slipped into 3; Bud pushed in. Dick was working a skinny pachuco—head saps—the kid on his knees, catching teeth. Bud grabbed Stensland; the Mex spat blood. 'Heey, Mister White. I knowww you, *puto*. You beat up my frien' Caldo 'cause he whipped his *puto* wife. She was a fuckin' hooer, *pendejo*. Ain' you got no fuckin' brains?' Bud let Stens go; the Mex gave him the finger. Bud kicked him prone, picked him up by the neck. Cheers, attaboys, holy fucks. Bud banged the punk's head on the ceiling..."

Ellroy excoriates the works of Raymond Chandler (1888-1959), author of seven private detective novels and well known for his portrayal of the seamy side of southern California, as "schmaltzy, corny and filled with male self-pity." He explains that he hates the "noble loner myth." Chandler had many weaknesses as a writer, but Ellroy by and large represents a regression, artistically and intellectually. Chandler was hardly a radical, but a healthy distrust of the forces of law and order animated his work. Ellroy, on the other hand, loves nothing so much as a sadistic police beating. While he devotes countless pages of his books to the methods, thinking and somewhat impoverished inner lives of cops, everyone else, as the above passage indicates, receives pretty short shrift. There is, in sum, a strong and unappealing attraction to authoritarianism that recurs throughout Ellroy's prose.

Nearly everyone is dirty in his books, and violent, and

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more or less corrupt. A vicious gossip columnist plays a significant role in *L.A. Confidential*. Another of his books, dealing with the Kennedy years, is entitled *American Tabloid*. Ellroy's work represents something of a marriage between serious prose and tabloid journalism. The intensity and obsessiveness of his writing holds one's interest for a time. Here, one feels, is a lifetime of anger, bitterness and resentment poured onto the page. But the interest fades in the face of endless and unlikely subplots, undeveloped characters, an unrelenting series of hard-boiled scenes.

Ellroy drives his prose at a breakneck pace. There is perhaps a method in his madness. The novelist is massively unclear and ambivalent about the society he is attempting to capture on (to use his own expression) "a huge canvas." Deliberation might very well prove his undoing, in that it would reveal both to the writer and his audience the serious gaps and incongruities of his stories. One suspects, as well, that Ellroy, like many another cynic before him, is obliged to maintain the stream of beatings, killings and double-dealings to protect himself and the reader from his own essential sentimentality and naiveté, which make themselves felt whenever the action slows down even for an instant.

In any event, Curtis Hanson *(Bad Influence, The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* and *The River Wild*), an Ellroy admirer, chose to make a film out of *L.A. Confidential*. His script, it must be said, represents by and large an improvement on Ellroy's novel. Or, rather, what the screenplay loses in obsession it makes up for in conciseness and coherency. And any film always has this over any novel of the same quality: images of the human face and its expressiveness. Unfortunately, the final product still doesn't add up to that much.

Hanson's film retains the central core of Ellroy's story. Bud White (Russell Crowe) is a thug, employed by his superiors to beat up and intimidate suspects. He hates wife beaters because, as a child, he saw his mother beaten to death. Ed Exley (Guy Pearce) is an uptight, play-it-by-the-rules cop, determined to prove something to his father. The evolution of the two characters is entirely determined by these traits. It is equally certain that, in spite of their hatred for one another, they will team up. They both sleep with the same woman, Lynn Bracken (Kim Basinger), a call girl made up to look like Veronica Lake.

Hanson is capable of getting fine acting from his performers: Australians Crowe and Pearce, Kevin Spacey as Jack Vincennes, James Cromwell as a villainous police captain. The weakest performance is Basinger's, who naturally won an academy award for it. *L.A. Confidential* has been carefully conceived and filmed. A great deal of attention has gone into creating the look and feel of a bygone era. The film has clever moments, and engaging ones. One feels certain skills at work.

But the director's conceptions are not that interesting. He says a significant theme in his film is "the difference between how things appear and how they are. Image versus reality, etc." Hanson explains that Los Angeles is a place that he has "always wanted to deal with as a city that has a manufactured image in the first place, an image that was sent out over the airwaves to get everybody to come there.... The truth of that image was literally being destroyed to make way for all the people that were coming there looking for it. It was being bulldozed into oblivion."

Indeed the film does not paint a pretty picture of the city, the film industry, tabloid journalism and so forth. But none of this unpleasantness is going to astonish anyone. There is hardly a hint in Hanson's film of a *genuine protest* against corruption, racism, stupidity or greed. The film, in fact, lives parasitically off these elements, as their enthusiastic chronicler. One might even say that the film contributes, in its relatively vulgar fashion, to the generally debased quality of contemporary life. How does that help anyone?

It seems that the filmmaker, who has undeniable talent, does not possess enough of an independent view of things to permit him to offer a serious perspective on the corrupt material he presents. So it always remains a question, as it does with Ellroy, whether he is opposing the way the world is or simply going with the (profitable) flow.

One can already hear the voices. "But isn't *L.A. Confidential* of value because at least it shows the corruption and violence of the L.A.P.D.?" It is time to categorically answer "No" to this type of question. Surely a thinking and feeling person goes to see a film or reads a novel for some other reason besides the desire to have confirmed the views he already held before he entered the movie theater or picked up the book.

A work that delves deeply into human relationships, difficulties and pleasures, *that reveals life in a new light*, is of more value, in my opinion, than all the heavy-handed exposés that have been created and that ever will be created.

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