

# American artists and American tragedy

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*Capote*, directed by Bennett Miller, written by Dan Futterman, based on the book by Gerald Clarke

In more than one extraordinary American novel or film a single, apparently arbitrary act of violence suddenly sheds light on the wider social reality. The recognition that something is horribly and *fundamentally* wrong comes crashing in on the reader or spectator as it often does on the protagonist. The reader or spectator, like the protagonist, experiences an overpowering dizziness confronted by the awfulness of what has happened and the awfulness that must have produced it. Even a glimpse of the chasm that separates America as it presents itself to the world and its own population—as essentially sound, healthy and democratic—from the reality, with its genuinely pathological tendencies, is enough to induce a state of ‘fear and trembling.’

Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences* (1966), for example, recounts the circumstances surrounding the brutal murder of four members of the Clutter family in western Kansas in mid-November 1959; the arrest of their killers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, six weeks later; and the eventual execution of Smith and Hickock by hanging in April 1965.

*Capote*, directed by Bennett Miller and written by Dan Futterman, treats the six-year period in Capote’s life between the murder and the publication of *In Cold Blood* (which appeared as a four-part series in *The New Yorker* magazine in the fall of 1965 and in book form in early 1966).

*Capote* is a serious film, but primarily serious, it seems to me, about secondary and even tertiary matters. The Miller-Futterman work concentrates on Capote’s inner conflicts, on his tenacity and his streak of opportunism, his genuinely human concerns and his ruthless ambition. The murder itself, the victims and even the murderers, much less the social implications of the case, are dealt with in a relatively perfunctory fashion. We will be told that this, after all, is a biography of Capote, not the Clutters, not Smith or Hickock. Then why choose these six years out of a nearly sixty-year life? This is a ‘biography’ of the genesis and creation of *In Cold Blood*, and it deserves to be judged in those terms.

In its opening sequences, *Capote* juxtaposes scenes of the author’s flamboyant life in New York, where he was celebrated for his novels *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1958), with shots of cold, flat Kansas in early winter. Capote (Philip Seymour Hoffman) happens upon an article about the Clutter murders stuck on the back pages of the *New York Times*. He determines, for reasons that are not explored, to make this the subject of a new, narrative journalism. Accompanied by Nelle Harper Lee (Catherine Keener), about to become famous for the writing of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and a longtime friend, Capote sets out for Kansas by train. In a hint of criticisms to come, the film has Capote absurdly pay a porter to compliment his brilliance as a writer in front of Lee, who, however, sees through the ridiculous ruse.

In Kansas, Capote, an Eastern (although Southern-born) intellectual, fashionably attired and effete, cuts an unlikely figure. Nonetheless, he manages to ingratiate himself with one of the lead investigators in the case, Alvin Dewey (Chris Cooper) of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation. In fact, Capote and Lee are having dinner with Dewey and his family when the policeman learns that the Clutters’ alleged killers, Smith

(Clifton Collins Jr.) and Hickock (Mark Pellegrino), have been apprehended in Las Vegas.

After the latter have been sentenced to death at the conclusion of a brief trial in March 1960, Capote strikes up a relationship with Smith in particular, now housed on Kansas’ death row. He obtains new attorneys for the pair, whose lives are prolonged by an appeals process that will last five years. The film suggests that Capote intervened in part at least so as to have the opportunity to interview and study the killers for his book. In any event, the novelist finds himself fascinated by and perhaps even attracted to the 31-year-old Smith, whose formal education ended at the third grade. They speak for many hours, developing an intimacy, and Smith eventually turns over his diaries to Capote.

To others, the novelist explains his intention to “return him [Smith] to the realm of humanity.” He sees the murder as the result of a collision of two worlds—the safe, comfortable existence known by the Clutters and the abusive, amoral domain familiar to Smith and Hickock, the “dark underside” of American life.

Moreover, in Smith’s unstable family life, Capote’s sees an echo of his own childhood experience. He tells Lee that it’s as though Smith and he grew up in the same house, but “he went out the front and I went out the back.”

For his part, the condemned man sees Capote as his link to the external world and as a lifeline. He feels betrayed on learning the name of the proposed work, *In Cold Blood*. Capote lies about his own motives, and eventually threatens to abandon Smith if he will not relate the circumstances of the murder. Smith finally does so, and the film repeats his cold-blooded comment, included in Capote’s work, as well as the extremely uneven 1967 film based on it (directed by Richard Brooks), that “I really admired Mr. Clutter, right up until the moment I slit his throat.” In a flashback, Smith finishes off Clutter with a shotgun blast, and rapidly dispatches the other family members, Clutter’s wife and two adolescent children. Instead of the \$10,000 in a wall safe that Smith and Hickock expected to find, they make off with some \$40.

Capote’s work expands from a magazine article to something of book-length as he pores over thousands of pages of documentation. The work obsesses him. “Sometimes, when I think how good it could be,” he writes a friend, “I can hardly breathe.” His editor at *The New Yorker*, William Shawn, tells him that the book, a “nonfiction novel,” is “going to change how people write.” The effort brings Capote no pleasure, taking a toll on his relationship with lover Jack Dunphy (Bruce Greenwood) and Lee. When Smith, near the end of the appeals process, applies to Capote for help obtaining a new legal team, the writer fails to act, all the while telling the death row prisoner that he has made every effort. The film implies that Capote wanted the twosome finally dead and buried—the appeals process is “torturing” him—so as to have a suitable conclusion for his book.

Responding to a request from Smith, Capote shows up for the gruesome double execution in April 1965. He has a final word with Smith and Hickock, breaking down in tears. “I did everything I could.” The barbaric hanging goes ahead. Later Capote tells Lee, “There was nothing I could do to save them.” She replies, “Maybe not, but the fact is you didn’t want to.”

An intertitle notes that Capote never finished another novel. Afflicted by problems with drinking and drugs, the writer died in 1984.

*Capote* raises many issues, not all of which can be broached here. In general, it seems to me, the very choice made by the filmmakers to concentrate on Capote's personal torments and shortcomings reflects a narrowing of perspective, a turn inward, as compared with the writer's own *In Cold Blood*. This may seem unduly harsh. Certainly Capote's life is a legitimate subject for drama. But which is a greater and more revealing tragedy, the terrible encounter of Hickock-Smith and the Clutters, or the failings of a prominent author? Without belaboring the point, it seems revealing about present-day intellectual life that the filmmakers naturally gravitate toward and find more congenial the latter.

Capote's careerism, even his apparent ruthlessness, is not an admirable trait. But his relations with Smith cannot have been smooth. And should not have been, frankly. To return Smith to the realm of humanity was an entirely praiseworthy project, but the man had committed a heinous act. How could Capote's attitude not have contained ambiguity under the best of circumstances? To imply that the author was somehow negligent, that he was even partially responsible in a moral sense for the execution going ahead, seems to miss the point by a considerable margin.

It shifts the focus away from problems of social relations in America, including the barbarism of capital punishment, toward secondary matters, in my opinion. Miller and Futterman are conscientious about many matters. Hoffman clearly invested a great deal of time and effort, not wasted, in capturing Capote's mannerisms and speech. In general, no attention has been spared in regard to the accuracy of the details, to recreating a specific time, place and atmosphere. The film is painstakingly and intelligently made, it looks and feels serious.

But *Capote* fails to treat the most pressing issues—above all, what is it about American life that produces this “senseless” homicidal violence? After all, the Clutter killings, along with the Charlie Starkweather case two years earlier (fictionalized in Terrence Malick's *Badlands*), inaugurated a period of mass killings in the US, a period that has continued up to the present day. And the new film's failure speaks to the forty years that have passed since the publication of *In Cold Blood* and some of their difficulties.

*In Cold Blood* is a remarkable work that deserves a new or revived audience. Capote did an extraordinary job of researching, interviewing and then condensing his material in an artistic manner. Smith especially comes alive on the pages of the book.

Born in 1928 in Nevada to a Cherokee mother and Irish-American father, who performed as “Tex & Flo” on the rodeo circuit, Smith grew up in the Depression under dire economic and psychological conditions. When the rodeo work ended for his parents, their relations soured. Capote refers to “a final battle between the parents, a terrifying contest in which horsewhips and scalding water and kerosene lamps were used as weapons,” which “brought the marriage to a stop.” His mother took the four kids to San Francisco, where she painfully drank herself to death in front of them.

The Smith children subsequently went to orphanages. A chronic bed-wetter, Smith was brutalized by nuns, among others. A period of time spent with his father in Alaska, who subsisted on unrealizable dreams, ended in disaster. All of Smith's family, with the exception of one sister, died young. Another sister, who also drank, fell or jumped from a hotel window. A brother, a seaman, shot himself in bed at dawn one day next to his wife who had put an end to her own life with a gun-shot the night before.

At sixteen, Smith joined the merchant marine in 1944 and later the army, serving in the Korean War. A serious motorcycle accident in 1952 left him badly injured, his legs disfigured. He developed an ‘addiction’ to aspirin, for the pain. With almost no formal schooling, Smith became obsessed with improving himself—this is now during the economic boom

of the 1950s—learning to draw, to play the guitar and expanding his vocabulary. He turned to petty crime and began spending time in prison, which did not improve his mental state or his condition of pent-up rage and resentment. Consumed with self-pity and delusions of grandeur, in constant pain and ashamed of his physical appearance, Smith was a walking time-bomb. He met Hickock in Kansas state prison and, on his release, they joined forces.

The plot to rob the Clutters' place was ill-conceived and absurd. One of Hickock's former cellmates, who had worked for Herbert Clutter years before, had assured him that the wealthy farmer kept a safe in his house crammed with cash. No such thing existed. He may have been thinking of a previous house that the Clutters hadn't lived in for a decade.

In Capote's account, the tragedy nearly fails to take place. The pair stop their car near the Clutters' large and impressive farm house. Smith has second thoughts. “I told Dick to count me out. If he was determined to go ahead with it, he'd have to do it alone. He started the car, we were leaving, and I thought, Bless Jesus. I've always trusted my intuitions; they've saved my life more than once.” They start to drive away. But Dick challenges him, “‘Maybe you think I ain't got the guts to do it alone. But, by God, I'll show you who's got guts.’ There was some liquor in the car. We each had a drink, and I told him, ‘O.K., Dick. I'm with you.’ So we turned back.” And the terrible deed is done.

In many ways a brilliant book, *In Cold Blood* falls short of greatness. It hints at the explosive contradictions of American life without every fully exploring the issue. Even in 1959, not all boats were rising. Smith and Hickock, given very little culturally or morally, were among those left out. They looked at the prosperous and comfortable with envy and malice. They certainly were not conscious rebels, far from it. Once in prison, Hickock makes a few populist references to the fact that the rich never hang, but that's about the extent of it.

In the final analysis, the brutality, emptiness and coldness of their lives found expression in the crime. Smith and Hickock were not inevitably fated to carry out such an atrocity, but if they had not, there were many others trapped in the same general psychological and social circumstances. America, now the leading imperialist power, was breeding such damaged, disoriented people in increasing numbers. (Today, for example, the US is estimated to be home to 85 percent of the serial killers in the world.) The next decade would make the names of Charles Whitman (the “Texas Tower Sniper”), Richard Speck (murderer of eight Chicago nurses) and Charles Manson notorious.

Capote brings out many salient facts about the killers' lives, but contents himself largely with psychologizing about Smith's condition. He wants to return Smith to humanity, but stops short of seeing his behavior in all its complexity as a social product.

What prompted him to write *In Cold Blood*? The film does not hazard a guess, but neither does Gerald Clarke, whose biography ostensibly forms its basis. Capote contended that his choice was more or less accidental, that the murder interested him less than the challenge of artistically arranging documentary fact. Insofar as this is true, it speaks to his own limitations. But it cannot be entirely true.

Something was in the air by the end of the 1950s. It was already apparent to the more observant or socially sensitive that postwar America had failed to fulfill its promise. The bitter struggles of the civil rights movement were a reminder of their own. Poverty in the cities and the rural South remained untouched. In Chicago the supply of jobs available to the unskilled began to decline in the mid-1950s; in the next decade, the city actually lost 100,000 manufacturing jobs. “Automation” was now a phrase on many lips. Particularly desperate conditions prevailed in the ten-state region of Appalachia. Recessions hit the US economy in 1957-58 and 1960-61, helping bring an end to eight years of Republican administration. In the last quarter of 1960, unemployment reached a postwar record. By the time Capote completed *In Cold Blood*, of course, a

president had been assassinated and riots had begun to erupt in major US cities.

A darker and more critical strain made an appearance in American filmmaking at the end of the decade and the beginning of the next, in works such as *Vertigo* (Hitchcock), *Written on the Wind* and *Imitation of Life* (Sirk), *Some Came Running* (Minnelli), *Bonjour Tristesse* (Preminger) and, of course, most consciously, *Touch of Evil* (Welles). These are films of sadness and disillusionment.

Capote was a 'man of the Left,' or rather the liberal Left. He had traveled to the Soviet Union at the end of 1955 with a largely black cast of *Porgy and Bess*, and wrote a semi-ironical account of the trip (*The Muses Are Heard*).

He also wrote *In Cold Blood* because he *could*. McCarthyism had subsided and more critical voices could be raised in public places. However, what had the anticommunist hysteria taken with it when it receded? America was not the same place culturally and intellectually as it had been before the war.

Film critic Richard Schickel has apparently written a new apologia for Hollywood's most prominent informer before the House Un-American Activities Committee, director Elia Kazan. According to a *New York Times* book reviewer, Schickel defends Kazan on the grounds that the filmmaker, in his 1952 testimony, only named names already known to the committee, "that one was a mediocre character actor whose blacklisting was no loss and that Mr. Kazan hurt himself more than he hurt others." As though the enormity of the witch-hunts could be reduced to this!

Whatever the results in terms of the careers of this or that performer, tragic as they may have been, the anticommunist assault had a far more significant consequence—a lasting and crippling impact on cultural life in the US. While the Communist Party and its periphery were the direct target, the purging of left-wing and socialist elements and ideas from the mainstream and the thoroughgoing taming of the intelligentsia had vast implications: henceforth examining American society to the root in film or literature would for all intents and purposes be banned.

Permission was granted to condemn any number of specific ills—racism, poverty, conformism, materialism, militarism, even the anticommunist hysteria itself—but not the social relations of American capitalism. Whatever he or she might go on to say, the artist was now obliged to take as his or her starting point the greatness and essentially unchallenged stature of 'American democracy.' And this has remained the case to the present day. Of course the artists at present are largely unaware of the restrictions, the latter operate quasi-automatically, but only particles of the truth can be told and half-truth is death to art.

*In Cold Blood* goes so far, and no farther. The fact that Capote chose not to imaginatively transform the Clutter case into fiction has some importance. Ultimately, there is something evasive in his adherence, more or less, to the immediate facts, as there is in all the products of the so-called New Journalism. The immediate facts of a given case are not necessarily adequate, they need to be maximized, even exaggerated, aesthetically worked over, 'forced' to yield up deeper truths. Capote steered away from that. A novel would have almost inevitably involved a greater act of generalization, a broader commentary on American life. He avoided that. Miller's *Capote* avoids it even more.

*In Cold Blood* was a great success, and deservedly so. Elegantly and disturbingly written, it had pointed out, if not adequately probed, certain ominous trends. But its weaknesses, its failure of nerve, also pointed to future problems, certainly for the author. He had the misfortune to descend into mere celebrity in the 1970s, into the company of Jacqueline Onassis and Andy Warhol and the rest, and sealed his own fate as an artist.



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