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ABSTRACT

Depictions of evil in the modern American vigilante film of the 1970s and 1980s fall into several categories. Modern vigilante film may be defined as film concerning the efforts of a private citizen in the late twentieth century urban environments of New York City or Los Angeles to operate outside the law in ridding the streets of evil and crime. Examples of such films include the "Death Wish" trilogy, and "Sudden Impact." Categories of depictions of evil include: (1) expressions of evil in society (the breakdown of social order, wicked youth, corrupt justice systems); (2) expressions of evil in the appearance of the criminal and in the behavior of the criminal; and (3) the protagonist as evil (discussing the moral and physical journey from respectable, normal citizen through physical danger and moral ambiguity to excessive, contemptible violence, i.e. the transformation from goodness through amorality to evil). The social implications of evil in the vigilante film include increased fear of victimization as a result of watching violence on television and in films, and the blurring of the distinction between good and evil. (SR)

Social Ills and the One-Man Solution:

Depictions of Evil in the Vigilante Film

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Depictions of Evil in the Vigilante Film

The American vigilante film of the 1970's and 1980's is a genre unto itself. It vaguely resembles the Western in its depiction of the good men versus the bad, but it is set not in the lawless years of the 1870's West but in the late twentieth century urban environments of New York City or Los Angeles. The vigilante film also shares common elements with the popular crime dramas of the '30's and '40's, where the criminals, despite their cleverness or degree of organization, inevitably came to a bad end as they were gunned down in the streets by local police or brought to justice by the G-men. The police, however, are not the saviors of society in the modern vigilante film, and they rarely, if ever, figure into the apprehension or punishment of the villain. They are more often seen as part of the problem than as part of the solution. And, of course, the vigilante film shares a common bond with the suspense film or mystery, although its suspense is rarely on the level of an Alfred Hitchcock thriller or Agatha Christie story. The audience, if not the authorities in the film, know early on who is doing all the unbridled killing in the parks, subways, and alleys. The suspense derives from not knowing just how far the vigilante can go before he is caught by the police. Which potential mugger will get a shot off before our hero does? When will an innocent witness appear and take that vital description of the lone gunman to police headquarters? In short, how long can the vigilantism continue?

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the vigilante film to focus upon is the depiction of evil. Few Hollywood films other than those dealing exclusively with Satanic themes, such as The Exorcist and The Omen trilogy, portray evil operating in society with such intensity, cynicism, and brutality.

Everywhere the vigilante protagonist goes, he runs up against evil. His wife is mugged, his daughter raped, his home ransacked, his own person attacked on the street with astonishing frequency and frenzy. Other victims refuse to testify out of fear and hence become complicit in their own assailants' activities. Police are indifferent, incompetent, or totally insensitive to the cause of victims' rights. Politicians minimize the crime statistics and spew forth glittering generalities about the effectiveness of their "new war on crime." From the punks in the alleys to the Mayor's Office, the vigilante confronts--in varying degrees--evil.

Vigilante Film Defined

The modern vigilante film should be carefully defined before examining how evil is depicted and manipulated within it. The vigilante film concerns the efforts of a private citizen, man or woman, to operate outside the law in ridding the streets of evil and crime, or to seek retribution against specific villains who did harm in the past to him or her. Such a definition deliberately excludes such films as Dirty Harry, Magnum Force, and Cobra, for they concern that unusual breed of men known as the "vigilante-cop." Despite the cops' excesses with regard to criminals' rights, these films nevertheless concern central figures, police officers, who are legally licensed to carry guns and to use them in their jobs of enforcing the law. The protagonists are not private citizens, disillusioned with the police, who choose to take the law into their own hands.

The vigilante film depicts an apparently normal citizen who, if left alone by the criminal elements of society, would have no complaint and no reason to strike back. It does not use a mentally unbalanced character as its central figure. This definition therefore excludes a film like Taxi Driver, wherein an obviously disturbed Robert DeNiro shaves his head into a Mohawk and sets about

the deliberate task of massacring the evil pimps who control the life of his new girlfriend, the teen prostitute played by Jody Foster.

Films dealing with macho war veterans sent back to Viet Nam by superior officers (somehow representing official government sanctions) to spring MIA's and POW's are similarly excluded from this definition of the vigilante film. Rambo, for all its current popularity and controversy, is really not the story of an ordinary citizen protecting himself against crime. It is the tale of a superhuman killing machine out in the jungles of a foreign country looking for trouble, and always finding it.

The films of the Old West brand of vigilantism are also excluded from the definition. The vigilante form of justice that seemed to prevail was primitive and often unfair, but was frequently the only type of justice to be found in a wide-open society where civilized towns and duly deputized officials were few and far between. The Ox-Bow Incident, for all its drama and power in depicting the errors of well-intentioned vigilantism, is not within the scope of this paper on the modern urban vigilante.

The Modern Vigilante Film

The modern urban vigilante film in this country can be traced back to the 1970 film, Joe. Unlike the other films to be discussed, Joe is really about two vigilantes, the blue-collar factory worker named Joe Curran (played by Peter Boyle) and the well-off advertising executive Bill Compton (played by Dennis Patrick). The film has been called "a terrifying and convincing vision of a deeply divided society" (Keneas). Set during those polarized days of the Viet Nam War, the film depicts two kinds of clashes, two arenas of cultural collision. The two men are completely different, with different kinds of jobs, educational backgrounds, families, and interests. Nothing on earth could pull them together--

except their hatred of hippies. Joe is a bigotted reactionary who fought in Korea and who loathes the peace movement. Bill is a seemingly tolerant liberal who happened to kill the pill-pushing hippie boyfriend of his teenage daughter in one moment of blind rage. That act alone brings the two men--and their disparate cultures--together. The other clash of cultures is seen in the lifestyles of the young hippies compared to those of their establishment families. It is a film about a tragically unbridgable Generation Gap, so typical in 1970, and about the random vigilante violence that erupts when the two cultures meet head on with no hope of communication or reconciliation.

The Death Wish trilogy, directed by the Englishman Michael Winner and starring Charles Bronson as architect Paul Kersey, represents the epitome of the urban vigilante film. The opening words of one review of the film are: "Death Wish is the film to see if you've just been raped, mugged or ripped off" (Orth). The critic apparently felt that viewing the original film, Death Wish (1974), would provide some degree of satisfaction to the victims of urban crime. In the original film, Kersey's wife and daughter are attacked and raped in their New York City apartment. The wife dies and the daughter becomes a helpless catatonic. Kersey acquires a handgun nd takes to spending his quiet nights strolling Central Park and riding the subways alone. When the punks and muggers come after him, he defends himself by shooting them and fleeing.

Death Wish II was released in 1982 and capitalized on the tremendous popular (if not critical) success of its forerunner. The film has Kersey now in Los Angeles still doing his vigilante business but with much more professionalism, aggression, and personal delight. No mere amateur anymore, Kersey rarely waits for evil to come after him; he seeks out the men whom he would have preferred to avoid earlier in his life in New York City. The film is much more violent than its predecessor, and a good deal less subtle in its characterizations and plot.

Winner moves Kersey back to New York City in Death Wish III. Evil is rampant

in the film. The police are cruel, inept, and sadistic. The youth gangs that terrorize the ghetto neighborhood where Kersey likes to hang out kill and rape solely for the fun of it. And Kersey himself goes to wretched excesses in his quest for the appropriate weapons to destroy the evil around him. He does, of course, prevail at the end, allowing for the very real possibility of a Death Wish IV.

The Dirty Harry films (Dirty Harry, Magnum Force, The Enforcer), as discussed earlier, do not really fit the definition of the true vigilante film. Clint Eastwood plays Harry Calahan, the San Francisco police detective assigned to the "dirtiest" cases by a captain who is consistently outraged by Harry's inhumane treatment of criminals. One of Eastwood's films deserves special consideration here, however, not because of Harry's presence or behavior in the picture, but because of Sondra Locke's. In Sudden Impact (1983), directed by Eastwood, Locke plays the protagonist, a female vigilante killer who is tormented by her vivid recollections of a night years ago when she and her sister were brutally gang-raped by a group of drunken teenage punks. The plot concerns her systematic location of each of the now-grown men involved that night, and her cold-blooded execution of each. Clearly operating outside the law, Locke meets Eastwood and they fall in love. He suspects her activities, yet somehow cannot completely condemn her behavior. Both have been victimized by the legal system before, and are disillusioned with the courts. As David Ansen says, "There's an intriguing, and morally complex, issue at play here, and its resolution makes one wonder where Eastwood could take Dirty Harry next--if anywhere."

The commercial success of both Sudden Impact and Death Wish was certain to inspire imitations. One such film, the title simply an amalgamation of its predecessors, is called Sudden Death. Released only a couple of years after

Sudden Impact, Sudden Death is the story of a female vigilante who is out to get the entire male sex. She is raped by two men in a New York City taxi at the film's outset, and spends the remaining hour or so allowing herself to get picked up in bars and on the streets so she can vent her rage on all men with her trusty Smith & Wesson. Like Bronson, she stalks the night alone, looking for trouble, and she is rarely disappointed.

The last pair of films of importance to a consideration of evil in the vigilante film are The Exterminator (1983) and The Exterminator II (1985). Produced by Golan Globus and directed by Mark Buntzman, these films star Robert Ginty (Anderson of The Paper Chase in a considerable role reversal) as the Viet Nam vet who runs up against the most vile assortment of criminals ever assembled in (you guessed it) New York City. The films are derivative of the Death Wish series, but they depict evil in more stylized and ritualized ways. Gang members dress in bizarre garb and carry torches in the subway system prior to a sadistic execution of a citizen who did them no harm. Ginty and his friend cruise around the slums in a huge garbage truck, an interesting and apt metaphor for the depravity and evil of the human garbage they must later deal with. The Exterminator films, like most of the others within this genre, make up for in sheer violence and ruthless retaliation against crime what they lack in character development and sophistication.

Expressions of Evil: Society

The old notions of tragedy centered on some flaw within the individual. The tragedy, the evil, and the resulting violence of the vigilante film are the result of the society in which both the criminals and the vigilante live. The films seem to reflect the notion that, "in today's mass societies the tragic flaw so often lies in 'the system,' those huge aggregates of power that can neutralize

and crush the individual" (Kroll).

The social order that most persons would expect inside a normal supermarket has somehow broken down in Death Wish. Three young punks wander aimlessly through the aisles, picking up items of food and throwing them around in a flagrant display of anti-authoritarianism. Grocery clerks and shoppers do nothing, trying to ignore the hooliganism, not wanting to get involved. Their indifference is a portent of the total lack of caring and compassion to be seen within society during the rest of the film.

The dirt, noise, and congestion of New York City is graphically displayed in Death Wish when the camera zooms out on a taxi cab occupied by Kersey and his wife, revealing a traffic jam that seems impossible to get out of. The honking horns, the grayness and filth everywhere, the profound sense of confinement and claustrophobia stand in sharp contrast to the beauty, serenity, and cleanliness of the Hawaiian beaches from which the couple has just returned. Winner uses the physical depression and bleakness of the city environment much as he does the supermarket scene--as a metaphor for a jungle that contains more perils than pleasures, more evil than good.

One of the more striking metaphors for the evil and corruption existing within the fabric of society is seen in The Exterminator II. Robert Ginty chooses to fight fire with fire, and takes up residence in a huge abandoned warehouse, dark and filthy. Inside, he puts his welding talents to use in transforming a New York City garbage truck into an invincible urban tank. Human garbage will be disposed of in the appropriate way, in a garbage truck. His character becomes a self-appointed chief sanitation officer, cleaning up the unchecked crime and sweeping evil off the streets as one would empty a commercial dumpster.

The peer group of the young is depicted as corrupt in Joe. How can any parent hope to raise a youngster properly when his or her peers live in communes,

deal drugs, engage in sexual orgies, and generally indulge in a lifestyle that is a strange mixture of Satanism and hedonism? Society perpetuates its evil ways, the film seems to be saying, by the early indoctrination of its youth. Joe Curran must go into this subculture and teach it a few lessons.

If the young as a group are rebellious and wicked, the police and the courts are seen as incompetent and devoid of justice or reason. In Death Wish III, the police captain sadistically beats Kersey in an office because of his past "crimes" as the New York vigilante. The brutality and intimidation continue against this private citizen, apparently without rights, until he agrees to the official's demand: to return to the streets and continue his vigilante killings in a crime-ridden ghetto. The police admit their incompetence and their inability to control crime while operating within the parameters of the law. They are hamstrung by the courts; only a vigilante can succeed in a society that cares more for the criminal than the victim.

Sudden Impact is an excellent example of the manner in which the vigilante film treats the courts. After the police risk their lives bringing in the criminal so that he may face a trial before his peers and his accuser, the judge (shown as a liberal and a female in this film) dismisses the case on a legal technicality. She appears perturbed at the arresting official for wasting the court's time, and is somewhat conciliatory toward the accused, who sits in the courtroom with a smirk on his face, leering over at both the police and his recovering victim. Again, the system is ineffective and condones the elements of evil within it. The vigilante films seem to be saying, in the words of one critic: "The Constitution may be a fine document in theory, but the chaos of modern society has enfeebled it" (Sragow 90).

Expressions of Evil: Appearance of the Criminal

In the modern urban vigilante film, evil looks evil. It is as if the director wanted to telegraph the nature of the antagonists to the audience. The villains look nothing like the villains in the James Bond films--mature, suave, clean-shaven and manicured. They are rather the stereotypical street-people--dirty, unshaven, sadistic in appearance. They are uneducated and uncultured, use slang and profanity consistently, and appear to be entirely without redeeming social value. One can learn to like a Dr. No or a Goldfinger for his ingenuity, organization, and paradoxical humanity as he subjects 007 to a technological torture chamber. It is difficult to like the vigilante's prey, however. He is coarse and crude, sexually insatiable, crazed on drugs, and eager to slash any victim who refuses to surrender his or her wallet, purse, or body. He is physically repugnant. He looks evil.

The best examples of evil appearances are found in the Death Wish and Exterminator films. In each of them, the audience observes young men of every racial background shot in close-up, leering into the camera as if we were Bronson, the intended victim. The villains wear grotesque Mohawk haircuts; some shave their heads completely. Others wear large painted crosses or "X's" on their foreheads or scalps. Many are tatooed. All seem to wear leather and carry chains. There is no mistaking these characters for anything other than the "punks" and "creeps" they are called by the vigilante-protagonists. The average citizen would certainly go well out of his or her way to avoid any encounter, day or night, with these individuals.

Expressions of Evil: Behavior of the Criminal

For the audience member who perhaps dismisses the "punker look" as an innocent stage of youthful rebellion and who prefers not to judge any book by its cover, the vigilante film delivers on all that it promises. The evil-looking

characters do indeed perform evil acts, and they do so with a profound sense of abandon and enjoyment. Quite unlike the villains in the earlier crime sagas of The Untouchables, Roaring Twenties, or Godfather epics, these young urban thugs often strike a victim for no apparent reason other than boredom. A few require money to feed their drug habits, but many wander about the streets of New York or Los Angeles mindlessly raping young women, knifing old men, destroying property, and torturing people who happen to get in their way. They are rarely interested in taking over the narcotics business, or in controlling the profitable and illegal enterprises of prostitution, gambling, or extortion. The profit motive that inspired Al Capone and Don Vito Corleone seems not to apply to this modern urban criminal. He is the human equivalent of a mad dog, a pit bull on two legs attacking people without warning and without provocation. When, in The Exterminator II, for example, a truck driver is taken prisoner by a marauding gang of young punks, he is not tied up and held for ransom. He is not forced, Patty Hearst-like, to participate in other gang crimes. Rather he is carried, kicking and screaming, by dozens of war-painted, torch-carrying, chanting gang members, down into a New York subway. There, in a grisly and ritualistic execution scene, the man is tied to the train tracks, and a switch is thrown. The punks rejoice as the speeding subway train simultaneously electrocutes and decapitates their lone victim. The scene is memorable for both its emphasis on stylized ritual and its vivid communication of a strongly nihilistic theme. These persons thrive on death and destruction. Nothing and no one has any value.

Stanley Kauffmann, writing in The New Republic, raises an interesting point regarding the evil-ness of such villains. He is not so sure these persons are really evil, or really even criminals, and states: "If forensic medicine still means anything at all, a psychotic killer is not a criminal responsible for his acts" (26). He goes on to make his point with a discussion of the youth gang

seen in Cobra, a gang quite similar to those seen in The Exterminator II or Death Wish III. He asserts that "though such ritual sadists certainly exist, this gang has much more to do with pathology than with moral corruption" (26). Kauffmann's point may be well-taken, and we perhaps should remember that mass-murderer Richard Speck was said to have one extra chromosome, and hence not capable of a criminal act. He is now serving life in a psychiatric institution rather than a typical prison. It would seem that to the rape victim or family of a murdered child that a psychiatric disorder or extra chromosome would make little difference in determining either guilt or suffering. For whatever reason, an evil agent has perpetrated an evil act against an innocent and defenseless victim.

The Protagonist as Evil

In the vigilante film, the protagonist is the vigilante. The writer and director work very carefully to see that the sympathies of the audience members are with the man who is out to right the wrongs of society. We get to know the vigilante fairly well, and we begin to realize that this man or woman has been wronged. He or she has been victimized much like we have been or like someone we know may have been. Sondra Locke's character in Sudden Impact has been raped; her sister is in a mental institution as a result of the same experience. The law has been no help to her in bringing the assailants to justice. As we get to know her character, and to like her, we feel empathy. We sometimes feel rage. The audience is on her side, wanting her to get her revenge.

The same may be said of Bronson's character in the Death Wish films. In each film, a family member or loved one is brutally slain, and the law can do nothing to turn up even the slightest clue. The audience slowly but very surely gets caught up in this virtuous man's frustration, and there is a considerable

sense of vicarious participation in the man's gradual transformation from law-abiding citizen to ruthless vigilante. Audience members seeing the original Death Wish in theatres in New York City loved the film, and helped make it a huge commercial success. David Petzal described the audience the night he saw the film in 1974: "The atmosphere in the theatre was electric. People absolutely roared with delight when the bad guys met the bullets. What they were seeing was justice" (67).

The female vigilantes have three things in common. They have been raped in the past, usually by more than one man. The protagonist in Sudden Death was raped by two men who stole a taxi and, on a lark, cruised up to her apartment building just as she was coming out to hail a cab. In Sudden Impact, Locke and her sister attend a party on a beach that quickly degenerates into a drunken orgy. A gang of five male perverts repeatedly rape the two girls under the satanic supervision of a hideous lesbian gang leader.

Another trait the female vigilantes have in common is their aptitude for sexual seduction. They are attractive women and possess an uncanny ability to lure men into situations that will inevitably spell death for the men. They have become clever actresses, knowing just how to appeal to the male ego (and libido) so that the violent outcome is always the same.

The women also share a talent for handling guns. They have apparently been practicing on the pistol range, and have become crack shots. The handgun is their only real friend, the great equalizer, and they go nowhere without it.

The male vigilantes also share common characteristics. They are often veterans of some war. In Joe, Joe Curran served proudly in Korea, and his basement is a monument to that war and its assorted artifacts. In Death Wish, we learn that Paul Kersey's father was career Army, and that it soured him on the military life. He became a conscientious objector during Korea, a supremely ironic character

trait in view of his later transformation into the most violent of all vigilantes, especially in Death Wish III. The character played by Robert Ginty in The Exterminator films is, like Rambo, a Viet Nam vet. Trained only to kill in a very unpopular war, he too has returned to a world that seems to have no place for him. He knows only how to fight an enemy, and that enemy defines itself within the gritty grayness of the New York City slums.

With the exception of Joe Curran, the vigilantes are not racists. They are white men who kill evil people without regard to race, color, creed, or national origin. Even Joe, who hates Blacks, ends up raiding the hippie commune and shooting what appears to be an assortment of mainly white teenagers. Director Michael Winner carefully orchestrates his Death Wish films to make sure that Bronson's punk-victims represent all races. He shoots about an equal number of Whites, Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and nondescript males of varying complexions and dialects. This way, of course, as one critic observed, "Bronson can be an equal-opportunity killer" (Orth).

The vigilante makes a moral and physical journey in these films. He or she starts out a good person, living in respectable, middle-class surroundings. He then passes into a middle-ground of physical danger and moral ambiguity. By the end of the film, the vigilante is committing acts that are so violent and excessive, often living in the same squalor as his victims, that he or she may indeed by regarded as contemptuous. The continued associations with evil have, in the end, reduced the protagonist to the antagonist, transformed virtue into evil. He or she is wanted by the police, but refuses to surrender to the official body he had originally turned to for comfort and redress.

The original Death Wish (1974) best exemplifies this gradual and rather realistic transformation from goodness through amorality to evil. Architect Paul Kersey is a self-proclaimed liberal ("My heart bleeds a little for the under-

privileged now and then") who was a conscientious objector during the Korean War. He is obviously a reasonable and compassionate man who believes in the present judicial system. Only after his wife and daughter are brutalized in his apartment one afternoon while he is at work does Kersey first seem to experience anger. His first stage--that of pacifist, law-abiding citizen--ends after he is repeatedly told by police that they have tried to find the assailants but the case if now closed.

Stage two begins as Kersey buys some rolls of quarters at the bank and places them in a sock which he carries around in his pocket at night. He is not looking for trouble, or even looking for the assailants. He merely wants to be able to protect himself if trouble comes his way. It does. A young mugger jumps out of an alley and demands money. Kersey hesitates, confused by his feelings, then smashes the sock full of quarters against the mugger's face. Kersey flees the scene, returns home, and is violently sick in the bathroom. He has begun his early stage of violating the law by retaliating against an attacker. He knows the police can do no good.

Kersey may only be perceived as evil during stage three when he receives a handgun from a friend out West, and begins to use it on the streets of New York. He now feels an exhilaration each time he deliberately places himself into a dangerous situation. He goes out looking for trouble. It becomes a sport. He frequents dark alleys, Central Park at night, and empty subway cars. He is no longer an innocent citizen walking back home to his apartment from the office. He is a killer waiting, and hoping, for a good excuse to kill. When he does kill, he does so cavalierly, without regret or emotion, without any more nausea. He enjoys his new role as urban vigilante. The ultimate manifestation of the perverted, homicidal personality now residing inside Paul Kersey comes in Death Wish II (1982). He has cornered a young gang member in the deepest recesses of

an underground parking garage, and the rapist is without a weapon, on the floor, totally defenseless. Kersey is armed but does not force the criminal to rise and go with him to the police. Rather, he notices a large, bright cross hanging from the man's neck. Struck by the irony, Kersey asks: "Do you love Jesus?" The answer: "Yes, I do." Kersey retorts: "Good, because you're going to meet him." He then fires his revolver point blank into the man's head. The virtuous and patient architect has become the epitome of hatred, violence, and evil.

Social Implications of Evil in the Vigilante Film

The people who attend the vigilante films at theatres--and they are many indeed or watch them re-run on cable TV stations with considerable regularity, enjoy the notion that the underdog is finally getting his due, that there really can be an effective deterrent to urban crime. A film like Death Wish is "a catharsis for thousands of viewers" (Orth). People who live in big cities read the papers and watch television news. They are afraid of crime. One observer, commenting on the popularity of the vigilante films, has stated: "We are getting to the point where life may indeed be as dangerous as the movies depict it, and we are drawing farther and farther from the idea that the law can do anything about it" (Petzal 68).

The increased fear of victimization as a result of watching violence on television has been the subject of research by George Gerbner of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. He found that 46% of heavy TV viewers who live in cities rated their fear of crime "very serious" as opposed to 26% for the light TV viewers (Waters 138). If viewers watching women being raped and men beaten and robbed on television tend to develop this paranoia that Gerbner calls the "mean-world syndrome," then why would not city dwellers who view the feature-length vigilante film develop it also? And what

about the suburbanites and the rural dwellers? Such films--fiction, to be sure--can hardly be said to be conducive to their desires, luke-warm at best, to visit the cities nearby.

Whether the vigilante films are good, bad, or indifferent, they do stir in viewers strong feelings of identification, frustration, and resentment. Not all of the viewers favor the vigilante. At the end of the movie Joe, a group of young people at a midnight Broadway showing stood up and yelled at the screen, "We'll get you, Joe!" (Gilliatt, "God Save the Language" 65). It has been said that the vigilante-cop blockbuster hit Dirty Harry (1971) greatly increased the price of Smith & Wesson Model 29 revolvers, as viewers, convinced of the omni-presence of violent crime around them, flooded gunshops to buy the weapon, causing shortages for years (Petzal 67).

Most of the sophisticated and liberal-thinking New York City film critics disliked and dismissed the vigilante films as fantastic distortions of urban violence and slaps in the face to the Big Apple. Penelope Gilliatt seemed to see comedic elements in the plot and characters of the original Death Wish. Her observations seem to place the film into a category of films heavily dependent on exaggeration and fantasy, perhaps not unlike Animal House or Tootsie. She claimed that Death Wish

> is given over to characters who voice every bigotry about New York that runs rampant in the rest of the world, which seems to believe that New York's upper middle classes had better move posthaste to the suburbs before their wives are raped or their children learn Spanish, and that the bums who make up the rest of the city are just "freeloading off welfare" with a switchblade in every pocket. ("New York, New York" 48)

Maureen Orth prudently took a more cautious and less flippant attitude toward

the potential ramifications of the tremendous popular success of Death Wish. The film deals with good and evil, and there occurs somewhere in the middle of the story a blurring of that important distinction between the two. The film inspires the consideration of a moral relativism that is difficult to dismiss. The conclusion to her review in a 1974 issue of Newsweek asked a rhetorical question that was to be sadly answered on a real New York subway ten years later: "They're cheering Death Wish everywhere. Which American metropolis wi have the honor of producing the first spin-off vigilante?"

In December of 1984, Bernhard Goetz, an unlikely Bronson imitator, was riding a New York subway train. Four Black youths were on the train, and asked him for money. They possessed a sharpened screwdriver. Goetz possessed a loaded revolver. Feeling threatened, he fired bullets into each of the four youths. One remains paralyzed three years later. Goetz was recently convicted of the illegal possession of a firearm. He was acquitted on charges of assault and attempted murder.

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