
Nicole Rafter. *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 201p.

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This book does an impressive job of organizing a vast array of occasionally somewhat disparate materials in such a way that seldom is any struggle to control that material apparent. Rafter exhibits great care and patience with her information, being careful to define her terms, explain her choices, and acknowledge problems of categorization. Any cataloguing system has gaps and overlaps, but Rafter's criteria are always clearly stated and explained, potential points of disagreement addressed. Her methodical approach is admirably paced, never belaboring points, never drifting off into vague circularity, never boring with repetitiousness; the scholarship is dense and consistent. The sleek combination of subject, theory, tone, and methodology results in a book with wide appeal: movies and analysis systematically presented in approachable language.

In terms of subject there is, as we all know, a ravenous appetite for movies and anything to do with movies. Any book about film with Robert DeNiro on the cover is going to attract initial attention by virtue of DeNiro's personal power, but this particular book follows that attraction with solid and sustained substance, consisting of compelling arguments supported by a rich collection of textual references, both print and film. The book lists 375 films cited, spanning the years from 1912 (*The Musketeers of Pig Alley*) to half-a-dozen titles from 1998. Although the book specifically speaks to crime films, Rafter is conscious of a need to open the subject up to broader applications, suggesting an interaction between what might be deemed a very small category, as she defines it, and movies in general. In other words, her specific examination of crime movies has implications for the society to which she speaks.

The book is able to support these implications because the discussions are grounded in social theory. Rafter is a criminologist, and, as the book cover explains, "examines the relationship between society and crime films from the perspectives of criminal justice, film history and technique, and sociology." Thus, the book theorizes the content of film products and also considers what conditions produce a tendency to create such cultural products, suggesting what various film phenomena have to say about the society which produces them. The book blends film history with social history and practice through the interpretation of film as

historical document, in a way. As the title suggests, crime films are mirrors, reflecting conditions more than creating them. One of the ways in which Rafter bridges perceptual and disciplinary gaps is by drawing a parallel chart, for example, which lists values and qualities found in criminals and their good-citizen counterparts: lawlessness and conformity; sassy repartee and polite speech; wise guys and saps; adventure and routine (152), which clarifies the balances found in crime films and the societies which produce them. The theoretical foundations of the book are interdisciplinary, comfortably so, and this is what makes the book accessible to thinkers from a variety of backgrounds and interests.

In spite of all these threads, or perhaps in keeping with them, there is no exclusionary jargon here, nor any academic arrogance. Rafter claims to have “written this book for general readers as well as students in courses on criminology and film” (viii) and wishes “the text to be as accessible as movies themselves” (viii). The book’s purpose is met in that its intended audience of general readers is indeed addressed by this very approachable text. The book is engaging in its clearly articulated ideas, non-threatening and unthreatened—there is no defensive note struck throughout. This tone is a mark of confidence, surely, and it is a justifiable confidence, as Rafter conscientiously presents her evidence in an enjoyable and compelling manner. She convinces, informs, and suggests believable possibilities, and never resorts to dismissive assertions or blithe leaps in logic. Rafter has confidence also in her reader, which explains the absence of condescension in these pages.

Finally, what holds all of this strength-upon-strength together is a careful and carefully explained organization and method. The book proceeds from generic history (*Regeneration* 1915) to criminology (*Reservoir Dogs* 1992), and follows these with four sub-categories in order to have the freedom to address particular issues raised by courtroom (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 1962), cop (*Dirty Harry* 1971), prison (*The Last Mile* 1932), and hero (*Thelma and Louise* 1991) films. Each chapter has sufficient films included in the sample to be safe from complaints about narrowness of scope, and the films included range from the obligatory and predictable titles reasonably expected from such a study, but also some surprises whose inclusion ends up making perfect sense. After all of this gratifying entertainment and information, what really sets this book above other attempts to analyze genre is that it dares to predict the future. This feature is what makes Rafter’s book an excellent choice for general interest readers and instructors alike. Not satisfied solely with retrospection, examining what has been already, Nicole Rafter uses the medium and social theory to project what will develop in crime film. If she knows what she is talking about, then her forecast should hold up. She has put her money

where her mouth is, in other words: if crime film really can be seen through a social lens, then it should have a good measure of predictability dependent on social issues continuing to develop in a certain way. This concluding chapter is my favorite in this book because it is filled with possibility, stimulating thought in the reader, granting the book itself a future, but it would not be so if Rafter had failed to do her groundwork sufficiently to convince me to trust her.

Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society easily could find itself on any number of shelves and on reading lists for a few different courses, in criminology, sociology, film studies, and literature at least. The final chapter begs to be used as the basis for any number of discussions and assignments, more and more as time passes and the accuracy rate of the predictions emerges. This book is a lively contribution to cultural study in several disciplines; my copy is generously underlined, for its succinct statements which define, collect, and evaluate, and which will be the basis of discussion and research for my students, both literary and film studies, until a new set of predictions becomes necessary—by which time one hopes a revised edition will be forthcoming. ✨