

The 'villain' also diverged quite considerably between the 1974 film and its 2009 successor. Most critics who compared the two films suggested that, despite Travolta's cartoonish Hells Angel appearance and expletive-ridden dialogue (both of which owe debts to the character he played in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*), the urbane Robert Shaw was much more successful in conveying quiet menace and a cold-blooded and calculating attitude toward the hostages. Travolta's frenetic characterization suits the faster pace of the action. Where Shaw was quietly chilling, Travolta is a loose cannon 'willing to kill innocents not out of necessity but out of spite' (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 June 2009), perhaps reflecting contemporary fears that violent crime is random and indiscriminatory. Although writing several years before *The Taking of Pelham 123* was made, Thomas Leitch might have been talking about the film when he said that violence was becoming 'more and more successful, and more and more in demand, in selling movies to a generation of teenagers who had grown up with remote controls that had sharpened their impatience, discouraged the deferred gratifications of slow-moving films, and reintroduced...[the] principle of slapstick comedy' (Leitch, 2002: 45–6). In the original movie, all the gang members are dressed conservatively and alike; all wear large framed glasses and false moustaches as disguise; and all go under colour-coded monikers, copied to similarly creepy effect by Quentin Tarantino in *Reservoir Dogs* 20 years later (Shaw is 'Mr Blue'; his accomplices Messrs. Green, Brown and Grey). The original movie thus follows the more common convention of the time of setting up relatively clear-cut distinctions between 'evil' and 'good' (personified by Blue and Lt. Garber). By the time of the remake, it was more usual to find distinctions blurred between 'good' people and 'bad' people and adversaries were frequently portrayed as mirror images or similarly morally ambiguous (*You're just like me!* says Ryder to Garber).

An immediate and obvious difference between the 1974 film and the 2009 version are the cultural attitudes towards 'minorities' and the use of language to express intolerance. While today's cinema audiences are more tolerant of frequent use of the 'f-word' (which does appear in the original but with far less frequency and to much more shocking effect), they are less broadminded about language that reveals socio-political motivated hatred of others. The original film was a very 1970s production, containing casual misogyny (*I gotta watch my language just because they let a few broads in?*), racism (*shut your mouth, nigger*) and xenophobia (a supposedly comic scene has Matthau referring to Japanese visitors as 'Chinamen' and 'monkeys' to their faces, unaware that they speak perfect English). Another area where the remake noticeably differs from its predecessor is in the use of technology; both in the cinematography and in the plotline. The hostage-takers set up a wi-fi booster to enable Ryder to access his laptop underground and monitor the Dow Jones Index (he has short-sold the market and invested in gold, earning him a profit far larger than the ransom money). But unknown to the kidnappers, a young male passenger

has an active laptop with a webcam, which has been knocked to the floor but is facing the interior of the carriage with a decent view of the action. It reconnects using the same wi-fi link, re-establishing a previously used videochat to his girlfriend's PC. When she realizes what she's witnessing via the webcam she alerts - and provides a feed to - the local television station, thus providing a perfect example of synopticism, to titillate, terrify and panic the TV audience watching at home (Mathiesen, 1997).

Some critics felt that the producer of the remake employed technical trickery simply because it was available and to cover up for a much thinner plot than in the original (hectic camera action, high colour contrast levels and frenetic editing and are the hallmarks of Tony Scott's films). The more mundane plot devices of the earlier film are also preferred by many:

It's all in the sneeze. If you want to know why 1970s thrillers are so much better than their counterparts today, you just need to pay attention to the part that flu and coughing play in the original ... The film-makers don't rely on the visual pyrotechnics that characterise Scott's movie, in which the camera never seems able to stay still for more than a moment. Instead, key plot points are conveyed in far more subtle fashion. Who needs a line of dialogue or a final-reel shootout when you can have a character giving himself away by blowing into a handkerchief? What better way to depict a corrupt and ineffectual mayor than to show him in bed with flu, being scolded by a nurse? (Macnab, *Independent*, 12 June 2009)

In 2009, the conflict takes place in the control room between Garber, his boss and a professional hostage negotiator, but in the original movie, all the conflict occurs within the gang and on board the train as Mr Blue fights to control dissent and disharmony among his men. In 1974, the gang are portrayed as a disparate band of thieves but by 2009 they reflect the *zeitgeist* by initially appearing as terrorists and then being revealed as the new enemies of the people; bankers and hedge fund operators (French, *Observer*, 2 August 2009).

Terror striking on an underground train retains some currency as a modern urban nightmare. One only has to think of the incident on the Tokyo subway in 1995 when the deadly virus SARIN was released on several lines killing 12 people, or the suicide bombings on the London underground in July 2005 which killed the four bombers and 52 others, to be reminded of the threats that a subterranean transport system can harbour. Nevertheless, in a post-9/11 world, the train no longer has quite the same potency as the passenger plane as a source of fear. Added to that, the remake of *The Taking of Pelham 123* remains faithful to the 1974 original's simple plot device of having the hijackers fool the authorities into believing they are still aboard the train when they have in fact escaped. Employing the same, relatively low-tech method, they lock the driving lever in the full-speed position, bypassing the 'dead man's switch'; a supposedly fail-safe system that automatically comes into operation if the driver of the train becomes incapacitated. Even the energetic pace that

is maintained throughout Scott's version and the obligatory high-speed chase at the end of the film (a new addition since the 1974 version) do not prevent the remake from having a rather quaint, old-fashioned feel. Most surprising of all is that Scott's film makes no reference to 9/11 itself:

Tony Scott's version of *The Taking of Pelham 123* makes one very curious omission. It doesn't foreground at all the event that changed everything – the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. This gives the film's portrayal of New York a time-warp feel. The hijackers and the cops alike both seem to be playing by old-fashioned rules. We're not in the realm of suicide bombing or apocalyptic destruction. The robbers want a ransom, not necessarily to bring western democracy tumbling down. (Macnab, *Independent*, 12 June 2009)

This omission is especially puzzling because, although much of the action takes place beneath New York, *The Taking of Pelham 123*, like so many other films, is in part a fable about the city itself. As the *Independent* film critic implies, the character of the city mayor is an allegory for the state of the city itself. In the original film, the mayor is a neurotic, bloated and sickly figure who can be read semiotically as a symbol of the bureaucratic mess that New York was in, and of the US's political vulnerabilities following the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal. The original screenplay is rife with references to the instabilities troubling New Yorkers (*We don't want another Attica do we?*, in reference to the most serious prison riot in US history which occurred in 1971; *There's another strike taking place; The city is broke*). According to Macnab (2009), New York was a city 'coming apart at the seams', it had 'something apocalyptic about it'; a sense of urban unease later captured in extreme form in *Escape From New York* (1981) in which the whole city becomes a maximum-security prison. In the remake of *The Taking of Pelham 123* the mayor (played by James Gandolfini of *Sopranos* fame) has become a slick, sardonic, financially savvy figure in control of his technologically sophisticated multi-media environment, and New York is similarly clean-cut and efficient (even the train carriages are remarkably free of graffiti). The final shots when the action moves above ground are unashamedly sentimental and are perhaps the most telling – if still somewhat oblique – reference to the legacy of 9/11. Flying in a helicopter over the beautifully-lit Manhattan skyline at sunset, the official hostage negotiator remarks to Garber that the city's beauty reminds him of what he's fighting to preserve.

Summary

- This chapter has attempted to account for the enduring appeal of crime and prison films, both to scholars of media criminology and to the wider public. It has offered several possible explanations for their attraction to audiences, ranging from an appeal to everyone's innate desire to be deviant, to a cathartic satisfaction in seeing offenders get their just deserts.
- It has been argued that a relatively small number of generic themes dominate crime film. This chapter has chosen to focus on three: masculinity, autonomy and the city, all of which are examined via some of the most popular sub-genres including: the Western, the gangster movie, the pirate film, the spy franchises, the classic American cop movie, the private eye or film noir, and gritty British cinematic realism.
- The 'prison film' has been included because of its sheer popularity and longevity. It has been noted that, while most academic scholars are content to analyse crime films without going much beyond their entertainment value, there have historically been greater demands of prison films to educate and influence the public on matters of penal reform. It is generally recognized, however, that prison films have on the whole not succeeded in this endeavour and have instead continued to create and perpetuate stereotypes of prisoners as a dangerous and violent underclass.
- The documentary has arguably had more success in informing the viewing public about the pains of imprisonment, although its claims to realism may be compromised, as the discussion of Apter's 'Up' films has demonstrated. Like other forms of ethnography, the documentary cannot be separated from the beliefs, motives and agenda of its originator; and, like all other media content, the documentary also has a mission to entertain.
- The cinematic remake has much to tell us about changing socio-political climates and attitudes to crime and punishment over the decades. Our discussion of two versions of *The Taking of Pelham 123*, made three decades apart, illustrates the ways in which audience's perceptions of offenders, crime, the police and other authorities, have evolved; the different entertainment imperatives that viewers bring with them; and the sentimental affection with which New York is held, especially since 9/11.