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David & Goliath and Crime in America

Ben Satterfield

1992

For years Hollywood has presented a version of the David and Goliath myth — decking it out anew every season, but it is changing like Dr. Jekyll, and right before our eyes. In the thirties, Frank Capra's simplistic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* fit the nation's bill perfectly with its affirmation of the good individual's triumph over the corrupt machine. This black and white view was reassuring to a nation desperately in need of hope and comfort, gripped as it was by forces beyond its control or understanding. In the past two decades, however, the triumphant 'hero' has appeared most often as a criminal, in films such as *The Great Train Robbery*, *Charlie Varrick*, *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, *The Getaway*, *Superfly*, and *The Pursuit of D.B. Cooper*. These are our modern Davids, tainted all, misfits who are interested only in getting something for themselves from Goliath, not in overcoming the giant-*that* is understood to be patently impossible.

Whether in movies or books, any David and Goliath story is likely to be popular in a nation of nearly a quarter of a billion people who are caught — at least most of them — in a

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social and economic trap from which it is virtually impossible to escape. This lack of power, control, and essential meaning is reflected by the trend in the modern novel toward protagonists that are more acted upon than acting. Our lives are made oppressive and puppet-like by big government, big business, rapacious institutions—all the leviathan elements that batten on us and shape our existence. (The uncontrollable scourges of inflation and recession, not to mention acid rain, poisoned food and water, toxic waste, oil spills or nuclear radiation, serve as painful reminders of just how little control we have; in fiction, John Sayle's *Union Dues* does the same thing — as *Grapes of Wrath*, *The Jungle*, and other novels did earlier.) We are — however reluctantly — dependent upon Goliath, and we cannot fell him; we can only hope to put something over on him.

Therefore, a book such as *The Programmer* provides a vicarious pleasure and comfort for the reader in its high-spirited depiction of one man's successful use of a computer — the very emblem and device of control — against the giant conglomerates for personal gain and redistribution of wealth. (Many fictional characters, major and minor, share a desire to use whatever sword they have against the corporate dragon whether or not they ever muster the courage to act. *Not a Through Street* mentions a “guy who worked for the phone company,” another disaffected worker who “was a quiet subversive. He wanted to sabotage the system, and his enemy was his employer.” Apparently, corporations are breeding widespread resentment within and without as golden chains are recognized to be chains all the same.)

But the unembellished truth is that very few “beat the system”; those who maintain power are usually invincible, whether within a structure of economics, government, or organized crime, as realistically illustrated in grimmer novels such as *Dog Soldiers*, *Cutter and Bone*, *The Man Who Won the Medal of Honor*, *Made in America*, and *Beyond Control*. In these very different fictions of the past fifteen years, average people like

important changes in the structure of business enterprise, so the ‘institutionalized’ criminal enterprise was transformed too.”

In motion pictures as in life, bigwigs of crime are far removed from its actuality and they affect the trappings of respectability. The criminal and the businessman are the same in a long line of movies from *Bullets or Ballots* (1936), *Force of Evil* (1948), *The Big Heat* (1953) and *The Big Combo* (1955) on through *The Killers* (1964) and *Point Blank* (1967) to the *Godfather* pictures of the seventies and this decade's *Thief*, *Rollover*, and *The Long Good Friday*, to mention only a few representative examples. Some of these pictures have been extremely popular; in fact, *The Godfather* is the third biggest money maker in American film history, which means it's the most successful gangster film in the world, and part of the reason for its enormous success is its skillful exploitation of the American Dream: the *Godfather* epic dramatically and metaphorically tells the story of our country. “Michael is America,” says director Coppola, who managed to make his conception vivid to millions of moviegoers. The success of *The Godfather* and *Godfather II*, claims Jack Shadoian in *Dreams and Dead Ends*, “lies in their intuitive grasp that there is a profound mood of uselessness in the audience that is ready to be exploited and sharpened to a point of pleasure.” Another film critic, Eugene Rosow in *Born to Lose*, states that American culture is “beset by a general and overwhelming malaise” that plays a part in its fascination with gangster films. Ergo, it seems, the popularity of Coppola's family-crime saga is also due to a feeling of dissatisfaction in the audience, an unarticulated frustration that I believe is a direct result of disillusionment with the Dream. That mainstream of America is beginning to perceive, dimly, its own insignificance in a scheme of feculent materialism.

Is it any wonder David has changed?

ally amazed him how much easier smuggling became once he learned legitimate business practices.”

“My rackets are run on strictly American lines,” bragged Al Capone, a fervent believer in capitalism, which, as he perceived it, “gives all of us a great opportunity if we seize it With both hands and hang on to it.” When one of the marginally honest characters in Abraham Polonsky’s *Force of Evil* says to a man attempting to syndicate the numbers racket that he doesn’t want anything to do with gangsters, the man replies: “Whadda you mean, gangsters? This is business.” And *business* is either the shibboleth or talisman of the crime world in dozens of motion pictures and scores of books. A polyester-type goon, who is concerned with the appearance of propriety and manipulating the system, to his advantage, in Jonathan Valin’s *Day of Wrath* explains to the protagonist, This is America. We’re businessmen.” In *Hard Trade*, Arthur Lyons presents an unscrupulous multimillionaire tycoon who is a master manipulator responsible for a unbounded swarm of nefarious activities including murder: “We are businessmen,” he tells the narrator, “not gangsters.” Meyer Lansky’s prediction that organized crime and big business would blend together inseparably appears to have been an accurate one.

Francis Ford Coppola’s *Godfather* epic clearly shows that corporations outside the law operate the same way as those within the law and that systematic crime is characteristic of America’s heritage. “Organized crime,” said Raymond Chandler in *The Long Goodbye*, “is just the dirty side of the sharp dollar.” The sociologist Daniel Bell in “Crime as an American Way of Life” makes essentially the same point:

“As a society changes, so does, in lagging fashion, its type of crime. As American society became more ‘organized,’ as the American businessman became more ‘civilized’ and less ‘buccaneering,’ so did the American racketeer. And just as there were

you and me (admittedly demoralized and without faith) are destroyed by the modern Goliath, represented by those who have power, all of whom are portrayed as evil. Many earlier books, including the well-known *Cool Hand Luke*, the naturalistic *The Man with the Golden Arm*, and the unsparing *Johnny Got His Gun*, make the same thematic point. In spy novels such as *In the Secret State* good but fallible men are wiped out when they start to uncover the corruption at the head of power, and this same pattern is repeated in numerous crime novels.

Our current David, in keeping with the times, is changed. He is generally ineffective, powerless, often in bondage, and he is no longer pure. Contaminated by the subtlety of twentieth-century pollution, he — or *she*, I should add, because the role David serves is not dependent upon gender, as the movies *Frances* and *Silkwood* demonstrate — is most often presented as an impotent gadfly buzzing the armored flanks of the most immense and virulent Goliath imaginable. Such a presentation seems to be an accurate portrayal of reality, for in this era of megabucks and multinationals, what chance does an individual — even an unflawed one — have against, for instance, ITT? Only rarely is the protagonist of a serious novel so far above average that he can approximately be labeled a hero — Alexander Panagoulis of *A Man* is the example *ne plus supra*, but this noble recusant is quashed just the same by “the whale of evil,” by the “filthy assassins who live on the alibis of law and order,” by the “eternal Power that never dies.”

In Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation*, one determined (and tarnished) individual is able to uncover a conspiracy, but his opposition to it is futile because the conspirators have an impenetrable shield of corporate power. And despite his fearsome and obdurate violence, the anachronistic ‘hero’ of *Point Blank* (symbolically named ‘Walker’) is powerless to affect the organization that operates through a complicated system of technology to which he makes little or no difference in his ram-

page for 'justice'. In today's complex, highly organized world, David cannot get a shot at Goliath, much less bring him down.

To be sure, realism is not the most comforting mode, as films from the thirties to the eighties (including *Breaker Morant*, *Lonely Are the Brave*, *High Sierra*, *I Want to Live*, *Medium Cool*, *Missing*, *Paths of Glory*, *Salvador*, *Serpico*, *Under Fire*, *You Only Live Once*, and *Z*) testify. Probably the darkest of the modern realistic David and Goliath movies, outside the greatly compromised *Cutter's Way*, is Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View*. The quester for truth in this film is murdered by the conspiratorial forces of an organization so powerful and so cynical in its utter corruption that it turns truth completely around as it squashes an annoyance — David.

We live in a time of the most sordid cover-ups, conspiracies, and plots devised not only by our mammoth government and its formidable agencies, the FBI and CIA¹, but also by monolithic corporations whose very size makes them impervious to morality. For the modern Goliath, nothing is *ultra vires*, and we feel helpless in the face of such enormous power. Our heroes necessarily have to be criminals because in our age of conformity and accommodation, these are the only people who aren't working for Goliath.

I always read the story of David and Goliath as a parable. David was good and Goliath was bad. Today Goliath is still bad, but David isn't much better, mired down as he usually is in moral ambiguity, like the hero in *Prince of the City* (or the main characters in *True Confessions* or Clark Howard's *Mark the Sparrow*), and he never vanquishes Goliath; any 'victory'

¹The basic function of the CIA, according to former agent Philip Agee, is not the protection of national security but the removal of obstacles to the economic command of multinational corporations. Agee's ponderous but fascinating *Inside the Company: CIA Diary* documents the sordid activities of this agency over a period of years. Some of the CIA's more recent nefarious activities are exposed in Jonathan Kwitny's *The Crimes of Patriots* and Leslie Cockburn's *Out of Control*, both published in 1987.

is qualified, Pyrrhic at best, and seldom even that. The biblical story may be archetypal, but if so, it has undergone a radical metamorphosis in our time.

By and large, the crime movie fits a version of the capitalistic myth known as the American Dream (a good early example is 1947's *The Gangster*, but Brian dePalma's 1984 version of *Scarface* is perfect). The criminal wants to achieve, to be a big shot, to have money and all the accouterments of success. He goes about fulfilling his ambition of material wealth in openly illegal and often violent ways, but his methods are consistent with the lessons of American history: take by stealth, trickery, or force, but *take* what you want; let the meek inherit what's left. Gangsters, like robber barons, are nearly always presented as lurid capitalists, the crime syndicate is shown to be very much like the modern corporation, and to a great extent crime is equated with contemporary life. Many of the movies seem to insist that as Americans we cannot be free from corruption.² ("The history of crime in America is quite simply the history of America," says Carl Sifakis in his introduction to *The Encyclopedia of American Crime*.)

Since American culture in general is founded on business principles and crime czars are successful capitalists, it is logical for the shrewd criminal to follow the example set by the pragmatic businessman and the modern corporation, providing as they do perfect role models. David Thoreau in *The Satanic Condition* explains that one of his characters "had been a smuggler long before he became a businessman and it continu-

²Perhaps the reason is that business in general is corrupt: for a carefully documented indictment of "the corporate-political money-power game" see Ovid Demaris' *Dirty Business*. "The Romance of Crime" is the title of a chapter in *Money and Class in America*, in which Lewis H. Lapham says "that even a cursory reading of the newspapers would incline a fair-minded reader to confuse the arts of crime with national policy and standard business procedure." See also *Den of Thieves* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991) by James B. Stewart, an editor of *The Watt Street Journal*.