

Noir After God: Werner Herzog's *The Bad Lieutenant:* *Port of Call New Orleans*

"I think there are specific times where film noir is a natural concomitant of the mood. When there's insecurity, collapse of financial systems—that's where film noir always hits fertile ground."

-Werner Herzog

The ingredients are simple: an overlong, unnecessarily awkward title that manages to make itself unfamiliar while at the same time announcing the film's uneasy status as a remake of some sort; a mediocre script, filled with leaden dialogue and unlikely coincidences, upon which unrestrained and irresponsible improvisations are unleashed; an actor of unhinged genius surrounded by B-movie character actors and interesting non-professionals; a freshly devastated landscape that provides a politically charged setting without requiring any overt political references at all; a seemingly willful indifference to plot, genre conventions and cinematic style in general. From all this, Werner Herzog, the most proudly film-illiterate of contemporary masters, as well as the most politically unsophisticated, has crafted the most politically potent and entertainingly unpredictable American genre film in years.

It may at first seem surprising to find the usually jungle-bound director dabbling in noir, the most urban of genres, but Herzog manages to update the B-noir tradition with a blunt sincerity that would be impossible for almost any other contemporary director. Because he doesn't need to bury his sincerity in layers of irony and winking pastiche, he can shrug off the over-aestheticized contemporary approach to noir and return the genre to a time in which tonal unevenness and apparent lapses in good taste were inseparable from thematic and aesthetic complexity and philosophic reach. With *The Bad Lieutenant*, Herzog has made a genre film in the true sense: genre not as a historically frozen tradition to be revered and replicated, but as a loose mode bestowed by the past to forge new ways of discovering the present. Beyond the fetishized stylistic tropes (the black and white cinematography, the hard boiled dialogue, etc), film noir was always the genre that explored the conflict between desire

and the law in a world of corrupt morality and collapsing social structures, where desperation and crime are the only ways to survive the present. Emerging in the morally and socially troubled post-war period of the 1940's in the US, film noir unearthed blasts of buried cynicism and nihilism within a society still clinging to a Christian worldview. This often resulted in a schizophrenic split in the films between the forces of desire and the law, which were pitted fatalistically against each other, with tragic and destructive consequences (the notion of forbidden fruit is crucial to the noir plot, as in the figure of the femme fatale). Justice in film noir often worked itself out as the ambivalent, even bitter, affirmation of the inevitability of the law over the hazards of forbidden desire. With *The Bad Lieutenant*, Herzog re-configures the central thematic concerns of noir and merges them with his own cinematic vision to create another of his cinematic testaments to "ecstatic truths."

Herzog sets his contemporary noir in the poverty-stricken ghettos and the bleakly luxurious hotels and casinos of decimated post-Katrina New Orleans, where violence, crime, and corruption seem natural to the point of banality. The film begins with a superb tracking shot following a snake slithering through floodwater, and Herzog returns to images of water and fish throughout. However, this seemingly religious imagery actually serves to establish a world that has completely left Christianity behind, and to link it with a pre-Christian world in which dichotomies such as Good and Evil or Sin and Redemption make no sense at all. There are no references to Christianity in the film, the only references to religious ceremony are pre-Christian pagan (a voodoo funeral) and post-Christian secular (Alcoholics Anonymous). The snake and fish are not biblical creatures but are among the prehistoric beasts that roam amidst the post-civilized wasteland of New Orleans, along with the iguanas and alligators.



The decidedly post-Christian world Herzog establishes also defines the odd relationship of his *The Bad Lieutenant* to Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant*. At first the two films seem to have little to do with each other, but in fact Herzog's film reveals itself to be more of a cosmic antidote than a remake. Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant* is a character study and Catholic drama about an anguished cop, addicted to gambling and drugs, investigating a brutal case (the rape of a young nun) that forces him to confront the unbridgeable gap between corrupt human law, with its brutal, meaningless earthly justice, and unattainable divine law, with its silent, promise of higher justice. Unlike Keitel's character, Cage's drug addicted policeman is not presented as an anguished soul split by good and evil, but as a unified, complex whole in which 'good' and 'bad' are inextricably

intertwined to the point of being inseparable. It is indicative of the differences between the two films that Keitel's anguish is spiritual and unlocatable, while the pain plaguing Nicolas Cage's is physical, in his lower back. For Ferrara the soul is something that must be wrestled over for eternal salvation, whereas in Herzog's world the soul dances, until it is snuffed out.



Herzog redefines film noir's usual conceptions of justice, desire, and the law for the post-Christian present. *The Bad Lieutenant* gives us no reason to believe in the law as force of good, or even as a coherent force of any kind at all. The law is only a means of navigating through a lawless world. Having a badge to flash and a Magnum .45 sticking out of the front of his pants, merely provide the means for Cage's Lt. McDonagh to maneuver through the wasteland of New Orleans, searching for clues to his murder case and for drugs to consume. The opening sequence of the film, in which McDonagh mocks then un-heroically rescues a prisoner drowning in a flooded jail cell during Hurricane Katrina, establishes that in the midst of catastrophe and social collapse being a man of the law confers no necessary moral authority and simply gives one license to do whatever one wishes. Although McDonagh doesn't seem to believe in the law, he does possess a kind of instinctual fellow-feeling for other people. Any notion of justice in the film is routed in this instinctual fellow-feeling. All of McDonagh's 'good' acts are driven by this fellow-feeling, which is more animalistic than human. They are not motivated by any discernible code of ethics or any real belief in the law, which he breaks openly and gleefully throughout the film. He is a bad lieutenant but that doesn't mean he isn't a good man in his own way. Thus, in the film the law is meaningless and acknowledged as such. Some sort of justice may be achievable, but the law cannot be relied upon to deliver it.

Unlike most noirs, in *The Bad Lieutenant* there is no object of desire, no femme fatale, nor is there any real fantasy of escape from the unfulfilling circumstances of the present. In the film, desire is stripped to its most basic condition, as reflected in McDonagh's addiction. Drugs offer only temporary bliss and relief, with the condition and promise of more temporary bliss and relief to come, which is to say they offer only transparent desire itself, infinitely renewable and ultimately insatiable. The classic noir plot acknowledges the overwhelming reality of desire but ultimately affirms the inevitable (if crushing) power of the law: desire leads to an unraveling that the law must halt, to a void that the law must deny.

Herzog reverses this logic. In *The Bad Lieutenant*, the law attempts, hopelessly, to mask the void, to which desire always returns us and forces us to acknowledge. In the film, desire and the law don't pull in opposite directions and tear McDonagh asunder, since, for Herzog, they are both ultimately problems of the void, and he sides unambiguously with the truth of desire over the false meaning provided by the law. One must uphold and enforce the law whereas for Herzog true meaning is something that one must seek out tirelessly and abandon oneself to recklessly.

McDonagh doesn't consciously attempt to transcend the law by adherence to a higher personal code of morality (his fellow feeling is more instinctual),

nor does he fall from grace through deviance from the law brought on by external or internal pressures (desperate social circumstances or desperate personal desire - often conflated in noirs). Instead something more peculiar occurs: McDonagh transcends the law through a kind of gleeful abandonment to his desperate situation, to the void of desire; he transcends the law and achieves justice through a regression into an anarchic child-like state, which revolves around immediate gratification and relief. In this sense, McDonagh achieves a kind of grotesque grace in symbiosis with his environment. He masters his surrounding as an unrepressed and irrepressible anarchic force running wild in a destroyed landscape thrust into chaos by the dual forces of ferociously indifferent Nature and hopelessly inadequate Civilization. Unleashed by the effects of copious drugs, Cage's 'bad' lieutenant discovers ecstatic truths in post-Katrina New Orleans in a comparable manner to Kinski's 'mad' characters in the jungle in Herzog's earlier masterpieces.

There is a tease of restored order at the end of the film in which McDonagh appears to have reformed his wild ways and become an upstanding citizen. After toasting his new promotion by sipping sparkling water with his newly sober family, he drops off his pregnant girlfriend (presumably no longer a prostitute) at their large house and shares a kiss in front of the neatly trimmed lawn. He drives off into the sunset but then plunges immediately back into his 'bad' behavior, harassing clubgoers and stealing their drugs. If this comes almost as a relief, it is because the film has so thoroughly established a cinematic universe in which the restoration of order is antithetical to the only kind of salvation possible—one in which ecstatic truths reveal themselves in the void that opens when belief in the law has been abandoned. As Herzog himself says, "There's such a thing as the bliss of evil. Enjoy it. The viler and more debased it gets, the more you have to enjoy it."

-Mike Vass