**Neo-noir for the '90s: Alex Proyas's The Crow (1994)**



What we often overlook in examining the film noir visual style or cataloguing its disturbing subjects, though, is that it goes a step further, speaking of the difficulties involved in 'racking focus' as it were. For unlike earlier reflections of our cultural failings... it lays bare the more fundamental problem of talking about, making sense of, or giving formulation to our world. The film noir thus not only depicts certain problems but also explores the terms under which we perceive and respond to them. In effect, it helps us see why we must 'slip' those messages in 'at night'.

- J P Telotte

The Crow is a neo-noir set in a contemporary context, a nameless city that is nonetheless recognisable as belonging to our time. It revisits noir generic signifiers within the context of late 20th Century counter-culture, particularly cyberpunk and gothic cultural influences. It crosses genre boundaries as noir has done since its establishment, containing elements of several of popular culture's most prominent genres, such as the action film and the superhero film based on a comic strip. But below the veneer of contemporary generic signifiers, which obviously help to make the film more marketable to its youth-culture target audience, it is possible to identify distinctly noir characterisations, themes, motifs and narrative constructs, along with a reflexivity that suggests elements of self-parody combined with the typically noir motive of mirroring a world of darkness. As Telotte says - "So long as we gaze steadily at these dark images, the individual and cultural forces stand at bay, their chaotic potential halted by our narrative's ordering force" (1989, p 36).

If generic transformation were to be categorised into Cawelti's four main stages, ie burlesque, nostalgia, demystification and affirmation, The Crow as film noir would fit mainly within the last stage. Its occasional moments of self-reflexivity are overshadowed by baroque characteristics, which affirm the classic genre trademarks of film noir while moving beyond convention to occupy an aesthetically current context. It is a filmic world of such excessive, attenuated darkness and degeneration that it takes noir stylistics to new extremes.

Temporally, it is somewhere between the 1970s noir world of Taxi Driver and the futuristic noir setting of Bladerunner, while the expressionistic influences visible in classic noir are even more evident in The Crow - the central male protagonist is explicitly a composite of extremes: light and dark, good and evil, human and superhuman. A striking visual image dressed in black leather and with a face painted stark white and black in an almost-parody of goth aesthetics, he is classic noir's morally ambiguous hero reborn into the late 20th Century. Both a victim and a seeker, he is a lone figure, vulnerable in a chaotic and corrupt world, where he is subject to forces beyond his control - both superhuman and human.

At its most basic level, The Crow fulfills classic noir's existential preoccupations concerning the noir hero - a lone figure, "alienated from any social or intellectual order" (Portfirio, p 215), at the same time as he is symbolic of the freedom of the individual. The Crow's plot revolves around the central male protagonist, Eric Draven. Eric returns from the dead in order to avenge the murders of himself and fiance Shelly by a gang of thugs. He seeks out each in order to kill them. He returns as a supernatural being, human but (initially) invincible. The film is based on the graphic novel of the same name, by James O'Barr. This in turn was strongly influenced by youth/counterculture, specifically music (hence the cyberpunk connection).

The Crow could, at this supernatural level, be compared to other comic-strip derived films featuring a hero with supernatural powers, such as Tim Burton's Batman. But The Crow is quite different - essentially Eric is not a superhero, he has no desire to fight against the Forces of Evil in order to Save the World. Quite simply his is an independent mission, to avenge the wrongs done to him. His is a quest for personal justice, motivated (and justified) by something like the Old Testament proverb of 'an eye for an eye'- arguably a primitive justification for violence. Likewise, unlike a typical 'superhero' movie (but very like a neo-noir), The Crow deals with violations and transgressions at the very heart of human society, namely the decay of societal structures such as the family.

For example, Sarah (a young girl semi-adopted by Eric and Shelly) is left to fend for herself in the dark world of city after their deaths. Her mother Darla works as a barmaid in an extremely seedy bar, and neglects her daughter due to her own drug habit and sexual involvement with one of the gangsters responsible for the double murder. Sarah is both innocent and streetwise, and is cynical about her relationship with her mother, referring to her sardonically as "Darla" and avoiding her where possible.

The world into which Eric is reborn is one saturated with noir generic signifiers in a typically baroque way. The opening shots of the film immediately recall the opening sequence of Bladerunner. The camera glides above a dark cityscape which is occasionally punctuated by plumes of flame rising into the night sky. This establishing shot also recalls that of the classic noir The Naked City. Shots such as this one are repeated throughout The Crow, as are typically noir settings within the city itself - seedy bars, nightclubs (although these are made contemporary by the punk bands playing in them) fast food joints (a meeting place in neo-noir such as Taxi Driver), abandoned lofts and a dark, complex mave of alleyways and wet, narrow streets through which Eric moves like a piece of the darkness itself, often merging with the landscape. This morphing serves two purposes; emphasising his quasi-supernatural existence, and following the noir tradition of noted by Schrader in which the actor and the environment are given equal lighting emphasis. "When the environment is given an equal or greater weight than the actor,it creates a fatalistic, hopeless mood" (Schrader, p 175).

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Eric is a typically noir hero in many ways. He represents the existential crisis of the noir hero - alone in an alienating and inhospitable world - and is the epitome of both the victim hero and the seeker hero. as victim hero, he is tangibly vulnerable and human. Even as he kills another villain he says bitterly, "Victims? aren't we all," and at other times his vulnerability is revealed - he suffers enormous pain when he returns to his ruined apartment and involuntarily relives, through flashbacks, the events leading up to his murder. The image of this painful process recalls that of the noir hero in The Locket, when he stands in his apartment after finding out that he has been betrayed, and is shown suddenly amongst the rubble and destruction of a battleground, harking back to his situation as a war veteran. Through this association is the suggestion that Eric too fulfills the role of veteran hero, for he has returned from the ultimate battlefront. This dramatic accentuation of noir characteristics is further evidence of The Crow as baroque neo noir.

At the same time as Eric has human, rational qualities, he reveals other, complex aspects of his character. After all Eric is a supernatural creature - somewhere between living and dead, guided at all times by the crow of the title - a sort of spirit guide which is actually more of an extension of his own personality. It is like a rational 'voice'which guides him through his lapses into madness or confusion, much like the classic noir's introverted voice-over is the hero's attempt to make sense of a dark and disordered world.

Eric also suggests classic noir's morally ambiguous hero. After all, there is something distinctly uncomfortable about the way in which he despatches his victims - in a ritualised, excessive manner, implying a sadistic pleasure in the act of killing in spite of their 'justification' as acts of retribution. With his fascination with the occult prior to his death, he is neither the cleancut superhero nor down-to-earth, pragmatic noir P.I. He is an uneasy combination of serial killer and dark angel.

Schrader has identified the overriding noir theme as a passion for the past and present, claiming that noir heroes "Try to survive by the day, and if unsuccessful at that, they retreat to the past" (p 177). Eric constantly retreats into flashbacks of his life with Shelly. It is, after all, the only thing he has left.

The other characters also each fulfil a role in the neo-noir context. For example, Shelly is the epitome of the sweet, loving, maternal, domestic wife of noir convention. AS she is seen only in flashback (with one exception), she is nota solid character but rather an impression, a vision - utterly victimised by, and helpless before, the violent and chaotic forces which destroyed her. The film indulges in a moment of reflexivity when Shelly finally appears to Eric at the end of the film, a soft silhouette with a halo of light who emerges slowly from darkness to face the camera - immediately recalling a similar scene in both Hitchcock's Vertigo and Lynch's Blue Velvet.

The ultimate villain of The Crow is Top Dollar, a character who is a constant, malevolent presence in the film. This character controls the gang responsible for the deaths of Eric and Shelly, and in fact they were killed because they were fighting tenant evictions in their neighbourhood, which in turn is controlled by Top Dollar. It is implied that this character essentially controls the entire city through a network of crime and corruption. Top Dollar owns a vast and phallic weapon collection and assumes a patriachal position in the film, referring to his underlings as "boys" and to Eric (during their final confrontation) as "son". There is also the suggestion of an uneasy oedipal relationship with his own father, the same father of the woman he is sexually involved with, his half sister Myca .

Myca has a significant role to play in the film. She is represented visually as an accentuated femme fatale, that essential noir character. She is sexual, vicious and insidiously evil, as well as possessing supernatural powers of intuition. Although sexually involved with her brother, she is not a victim of his dominance in the way Mrs Mulwray was to her father in Chinatown. Rather, she is complicit, and in fact seems to have equal power-status with her brother. Dark-eyed, dark-haired and dressed mainly in sleek black revealing clothing, she is subjected to the voyeuristic gaze of the camera which keeps returning to her whenever she is in a scene, as she drapes herself provocatively across furniture, or leans sinuously over her brother during a meeting. She seldom speaks and her movements are serpentine and suggestive, even as she commits acts of violence. She has a fetishistic obsession with eyes - both human eyeballs themselves (which she slices from the head of a woman killed by her brother) and with their wider associations with seeing.

The eye motif which recurs frequently in The Crow is a powerful one, demonstrating the film's reflexivity. The concept of "seeing", of the subjectivity of the viewer, suggests the illuminating powers of vision, and Telotte's description of film noir as a "mirror" which through reflection allows enlightenment. Myca recognises the power of vision. She burns human eyeballs and inhales the smoke, believing it will endow her with supernatural sight. Eerily this does seem to happen at first - she is literally a "seer" who warns her brother, "There are energies aligned against you", and is also the first to discover the true nature of Eric's existence - that without the crow, his guide and other self, he is powerless. However, it is the power of vision which ultimately destroys her, implying that sight can be salvation. As she holds the crow before Eric, ready to extinguish his life, he suddenly returns her gaze and the crow spontaneously flies at her face and pecks out her eyes, causing her to fall to her death.

The first-person narration of The Crow is also divided, according to the fractured 'self' of Eric's connection to the crow. At crucial moments in the film, a close-up of Eric's eye is suddenly juxtaposed with that of the crow's, and we then see things from the crow's perspective for a few moments. The world seen through the crow's eyes is one which slants crazily and is defined by stark black and white contrasts, suggesting that the crow's perspective is sharper and more true, or at least focussed on essential elements only.

The concept of "seeing" is emphatically linked with the concept of power in The Crow. Myca has the power of second sight, and Top Dollar too is associated with far-reaching vision. The first shot we have of his apartment focusses on a security camera, implying that his power and status are linked to his ability to observe without being observed. He himself acknowledges, "All the power in the world resides in the eyes... sometimes they're more powerful than the people that bear them".

Ultimately it is the power of seeing which saves Eric. In his final confrontation with Top Dollar, he finds himself in an impossible situation. They are fighting on the roof of a church, and he is weaponless, and without his supernatural powers as the crow has been injured. He puts his hands on Top Dollar's eyes, and psychicly "passes" him the vision of Shelly struggling for life in a hospital bed. The pain of this sensation, felt by Eric and now transferred to Top Dollar, knocks him from the roof of the church and he is impaled upon a spike.

The film ends as Shelly appears to Eric in the graveyard of the church and bends down to kiss him. The final images are of the dark cityscape, a return to the opening sequence.

This ending implies that even if individuals can fight for personal justice and win, the larger context - a dark filmic world of corruption and violence - will not change. The Crow is not so much a story of the victory of good over evil, but a victory of personal will through vengeance. This is essentially a film noir moral conclusion, that carries through in other contemporary neo-noir such as LA Confidential. It is ultimately a dark message, for a world where horrific violence is the solution for injustice has decidedly nihilistic undertones.

The Crow's reflection of a dark world ultimately fulfills Telotte's claim that noir "lays bare the more fundamental problem of talking about, making sense of, or giving formulation to the world".

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http://www.angelfire.com/80s/amyonline/crow.