

# CRIMINALITY, OBSESSIVE COMPULSION, AND AESTHETIC RAGE IN "STRAIGHT TIME"

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When I first saw "Straight Time"<sup>1</sup> I was working as a law clerk in the Prisoner's Rights Office of the Public Defender in Vermont. I was immediately struck by the movie. All of the characters, the situations, and the details in the film had familiarity for me then. I tried to understand why the movie had such a deep resonance. Perhaps it was just because of my work at that time, interviewing prisoners while attending law school and struggling to become a lawyer. I was fascinated by the movie, compelled by the starkness and edge of the characters, images, and story. Although I was working and attending law school in the northeast and the movie was set in Los Angeles, it reminded me of the stories of so many of our clients, striving for recognition and respect in a world devoid of narrative possibilities, a world where they were type-cast as pariahs, a world in which they would probably, at best, be released and confined to boring and menial day-jobs and a marginal, struggling, banal existence. Like the criminals in "Straight Time," it seemed to me that the one thing that many of our clients were proficient at, or at least were passionate about, was criminality. Criminality was their calling and their fate and their career. It struck me that the most disturbing and yet compelling aspect of the film was how the characters, especially Max Dembo (Dustin Hoffman), unapologetically embraced their fate, just as many of the prisoners did.

Of course, a "realistic" film about criminality as an unapologetic career choice, and the angry compulsion of criminality, is not a theme for a commercial film. Such a film will not attract an audience by including the well-rendered and lovingly observed visual details of how different types of crimes are committed (a "how to" book of burglary and robbery). And, perhaps, the articulation of the code of "professional" criminal conduct, and the closely observed details of life inside a prison, are not normally part of Hollywood visions of crime and punishment. Hollywood stories of criminals and crime are usually redemption stories, or moralistic stories, or even cautionary tales where outlaws are punished and destroyed for their crimes after it is too late for redemption. And there are "modern" stories that offer up simple and reductionist psychological explanations for criminality. "Straight Time"

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<sup>1</sup> "Straight Time," Sweetwall Productions Inc., The First Artists Production Company Ltd., and Warner Bros. Inc. (1977).

does none of these. It is bleak and unsparing. It does not romanticize criminality or create empathic characters that the audience will readily identify with. Nor are the criminals in "Straight Time" wealthy or successful, part of noble mob families and their traditions, or even romantic outlaws. The story articulates a bleak and unsparing criminal code in opposition to the morality of conventional society. The story, like the characters in it, is unapologetic: the narrative offers no easy psychological explanations of criminality and crime, no justifications or excuses. The characters do what they have to do, and ultimately accept the consequences for their actions.

The "plot" may be summarized simply: Max Dembo, a career criminal, is released from a California prison. He heads to Los Angeles. Initially, he struggles to go straight, to find a job, and to comply with the terms of his parole and the wishes of his parole officer. He meets a young girl, a counselor in an employment office new to the job. She helps him find a job. They begin a relationship. Meanwhile, Dembo reconnects with his prison buddies, although, initially, he is determined not to return to crime. But then, after his parole officer suspects him of using drugs, he is arrested, processed at the Los Angeles jail, degraded, humiliated and released. The experience is transformative. His rage dwarfs his desire for love and his aspiration to return to a straight life. He takes his revenge upon his parole officer and returns to his true calling. The narrative denouement occurs when one of his prison friends, his closest accomplice and former cellmate Willy Darin a/k/a Willy the Bear, who serves as a driver in the final unsuccessful heist of a Beverly Hills jewelry store, leaves Dembo and another accomplice stranded in the lot of the jewelry store without a getaway vehicle. Dembo's other accomplice and friend, Jerry Schue, is killed by the police as the two try to escape on foot. In the shootout with the police, Dembo murders a policeman. Dembo next turns his anger on Willy the Bear and kills him. He then attempts to make his final escape accompanied by Jenny, the vocational counselor. He abandons her after she discovers that he has murdered a policeman. He speeds off into the desert toward the end of his self-destructive journey.

This plot summary does not capture the strength of the film: the nuances of the story, the intentionally flat visual surfaces, the dialogue, or the quality performances of the actors.

The screenplay of "Straight Time" was co-written by Edward Bunker based upon his semi-autobiographical novel, *NO BEAST SO FIERCE*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Bunker, *NO BEAST SO FIERCE* (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 1993)(Reprint, original out-of-print and unavailable).

Dustin Hoffman's Max Dembo is especially remarkable and unsparing: he realistically portrays the interior and exterior life of a prisoner on parole, his efforts to fit into and find meaning in a straight life, his confrontations with a cruel parole officer and a brutal and inhumane bureaucracy, and the prisoner's choice to return to criminality as preferable to the "straight" life. Hoffman captures Dembo's tight-lipped fury and obsessive-compulsive rage; it is Dembo's pathology that drives the film.

When I first saw it, "Straight Time" struck me as a narrative documentary, a thinly disguised, barely reinvented verite-like look at criminality. The film was so bleak and unsparing that, despite Hoffman's remarkable performance and an ensemble cast performance by some of Hollywood's best character actors, the movie was a dismal failure at the box office and was withdrawn two weeks after its initial release.

The initial reviews of the film by mainstream critics were not kind. For example, Frank Rich, generally an engaging and buoyantly positive critic, then reviewing films for *Time* magazine before switching to the *New York Times*, noted that "Straight Time" "is all matter-of-fact incidents. . . . The movie chooses to rub our noses in the sad predictability of Max's life, as if sheer gloom were its own reward." The review continues:

[W]hile "Straight Time" offers a convincing portrait of a loser, it never gives us any reason to care whether the portrait is genuine or not. The fault lies not with Hoffman's performance, but with the movie's narrow, spartan script. The writers are so eager to avoid sentimentality that they turn journalistic objectivity into a form of dramatic novocain. As we watch burglar Max Dembo doggedly pursue his career of luckless crime, it is impossible to feel anything but numbness.<sup>3</sup>

The review by Art Harris in the *Washington Post* was even more vicious: "[I]t's obvious why [Dustin] Hoffman wants to disassociate himself from the film. What makes *Straight Time* so crooked is almost everything in it."<sup>4</sup>

The next time I watched the film was over ten years later in a Law, Film and Popular Storytelling course I taught at the University of Connecticut School of Law.<sup>5</sup> Initial discussion of the film was, as I recall,

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Rich, *Time*, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> "Straight Time: A Crooked Couple of Hours," *Washington Post*, March 24, 1978.

<sup>5</sup> Some of my observations about the teaching of "Straight Time" are drawn from Philip Meyer, *Law Students Go to the Movies*, 24 *Conn. L. Rev.* 893 (1992).

very brief. Students did not respond to my enthusiasm for the film, for the settings, the plot line, and the realism of the characters. No one seemed to have much to say. Discussion came alive only when students began to talk about why they did not like or respond to the film. They thought the characters were "flat." Students had no empathy for anyone in the film, especially not Max Dembo. They did not like the visual surfaces of the movie: they seemed repelled by the aesthetics depicted in the film: the styles of bell-bottoms and acetate shirts and long hair, the settings of strip malls, bus stations and government offices in shopping malls, and even the 1970's "shopping mall music" identified by one student in the soundtrack all made the film difficult for them to watch. But student criticism went deeper than this. Students found the lack of explanation (psychological or societal) for the characters' (especially Max Dembo's) criminality frustrating and disturbing.

Students observed that Dembo was an angry loser and could not understand why I was interested in him or the criminal sub-culture that the film so accurately depicted. Although I asserted that, based on my experience, the details of the film, of events and characters and experiences, were deadly accurate, many students seemed quite skeptical about this. Students could not understand or believe in Jenny's (Dembo's girlfriend's) attraction to Dembo, and found their relationship unrealistic, disturbing, and a "male fantasy." The negative reactions to the film were reflected in the students' course journals, and several students in the seminar recommended that I no longer use the film in the course. I dropped the film from the required viewing list.

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Now, viewing the film for a third time, I realize that my students and the mainstream critics were, at least in some ways, correct. There is bleakness and discomfort and lack of psychological explanation for the characters' criminal motivations in the film. Jenny's attraction to Hoffman's criminality is unexplained. Dembo's obsession with the bureaucratic perversion of his parole officer, and how and why his hatred toward his parole officer (whom he strips and chains to a link fence on the L.A. Freeway) trumps his affection for the beautiful and masochistic Jenny, are psychological themes that are left unexplored. Nor are the psychological forces that compel Dembo's obsessive-compulsive rage explored.

The film simply and maddeningly stays on the surface of the events it so accurately depicts. And the direction of Dembo's journey—the narrative momentum of the film—is all downhill: Dembo progressively spirals downward shortly after his release from prison and his brief

effort to succeed at "straight time." The velocity of Dembo's descent increases as the film's plot progresses. The bureaucracy and his parole officer are, of course, oppressive. And the work that he finds is menial and unfulfilling. Psychological relationships (outside of the professional friendships and the covert and criminal sexuality) are nonexistent. It is only in criminality that he finds relief, if not redemption.

The bleakness of the cinematic landscape, the unexplained and unredeemed psychology of Max Dembo, and the unsparing plot, however, are the strongest as well as the weakest features of the film and are still disturbingly accurate. Max Dembo, and all the superbly played ensemble characters in "Straight Time," inhabit a banal and aesthetically repulsive world devoid of love, rewarding work, success, and fulfillment. The characters feed off criminality. For Max Dembo criminality offers professional competence, and a profession where he can passionately express his rage and obsessive—compulsive nature. It offers him moments of transcendence that he cannot otherwise find in the banality of straight life. When he is provided with an excuse, he lets go of his pursuit of the straight life to do what he does best, and what he is truly passionate about.

There are reasons for Dembo's criminality, but they are not the conventional ones offered by the typical Hollywood prison movie. For example, Dembo has sufficient money from a previous successful bank robbery when he plans the final jewelry store heist that goes wrong. Much of the attraction of this crime for Dembo is in the danger, and in the fact that the crime is to take place on the daylight stage of Beverly Hills, in a store filled with customers and the obnoxious and patronizing salespeople Dembo has already met when he cased the store with his girlfriend Jenny, shopping for the jewels that he could not afford to buy her. Likewise, after an earlier robbery of a poker game in the valley does not occur because an associate has failed to deliver shotguns necessary for the crime, Dembo breaks through a brick wall into a pawn shop to steal a shotgun, and then caresses and coos to the weapon as he huddles in a corner of the store. For Dembo, criminality is filled with passion and sexuality and self-expression not to be found elsewhere.

Criminality provides, similarly, a life force for all the characters in the film. Jenny, the vocational counselor who becomes Dembo's girlfriend (remarkably portrayed by Teresa Russell), is a sympathetic post-Sixties masochist. She is drawn ever closer to Hoffman the more deeply that he sinks into criminality until his actions become so extreme that she becomes physically ill and can finally take no more. Dembo's parole officer Earl Frank (F. Emmett Walsh) is as much of a sadist as Jenny is a masochist, feeding off abuse of institutional and legal

authority and bureaucratic power while indulging vicariously in the criminality of his clients.

The need for criminality is apparent in all the other characters in the film; it is their lifeblood, the work that gives their lives meaning. For example, after his release Dembo visits with his closest friend Jerry Schue (Harry Dean Stanton), a painting contractor. Schue has apparently gotten it all together back in the straight world. He has a successful business, a fun-spirited and loving wife, a nice home in the valley and even a recently built oversize in-ground swimming pool. Surely, this is the "straight" life that every prisoner from Vacaville to San Quentin fantasizes about during incarceration. Schue speaks to Dembo as the two sit blissfully while Schue's wife goes for more burgers and beer: "Just get me out of here." Soon, the two are planning the heist of a card game in the valley, and then modifying shotguns in the garage workshop for a bank job, and then planning the big score in Beverly Hills. Likewise, Dembo's former prison partner and cellmate, Willy Darin (the weak and drug-dependent Willy the Bear) longs to take refuge from his wife and child, to become Dembo's "partner" once again and to return to crime, even though—when Dembo provides him with this opportunity—he is too fearful to follow through and complete the "act." As a result of this weakness and "betrayal," he must die.

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Dembo is motivated by rage and obsessive compulsion, perfectly captured and expressed in Hoffman's tight-lipped performance. Where does Dembo's obsessive anger come from? The movie does not say. The narrative intentionally stays on the surface, in the present tense, rather than going back into the past for psychological explanations as to what makes Dembo a criminal. Unlike other Hollywood films "Straight Time" provides no easy psychological answers for Dembo's criminality and anger (no flashbacks to a brutal past or dialogue revealing abusive childhood incidents). There are only a few lines that allude to the brutality that might have generated Dembo's rage, and these are seemingly nonsequitur: for example, after Dembo is busted by Earl Frank, the parole officer, and searched for tracks, Frank asks how Dembo received the burn marks and scars on his hands and arms. And, at the end of the movie, there are pictures of Max Dembo tracing his incarceration from a youth until his final capture at the end of the picture. But the movie does not provide explanations of Dembo's character.

The dramatic turning point of the film, in the formation of Dembo's character and all subsequent action, occurs relatively early when Dembo

is wrongfully busted by his parole officer, Earl Frank. Reincarceration is the reification of Dembo's dreams: the institutional degradations of several days at the L.A. County jail serve as the trigger to compound, justify and sustain Dembo's precious rage. When Dembo is searched, deloused and drug-tested, he accepts his fate, savoring and hoarding every moment of his internalized fury. In these moments he contemplates revenge against his parole officer, rather than Jenny's powerful sexiness. Unlike other standard Hollywood movies, there is no character reversal later in the movie when Dembo realizes that he has made a bad choice. Instead, the final two-thirds of the movie is devoted to how Dembo embraces his fate and passionately plays out his criminality and his eventual destruction. This dramatic choice is what repelled many of my students, and many mainstream critics as well.

The bleakness of the movie proved too much for the students and for many of the critics. "Straight Time" was a downer that seemed so bleak that many did not respond to it. Strangely, it is that same bleakness, the unsparing quality in rendering of psychology and relationships, the accuracy of detail, and the inevitable downhill course of Dembo's return to the "straight" world that simultaneously makes the movie quite special and rewarding, if not a crowd pleaser.

