

“We Ain’t Thinking About tomorrow”: Narrative Immediacy and the Digital Period Aesthetic in Michael Mann’s *Public Enemies*

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Alongside filmmakers such as Danny Boyle, David Fincher and Steven Soderbergh, Michael Mann is a modern director who has actively engaged with new technologies to enhance his production practices. In shifting his attention to digital video for both film and television productions – including *Robbery Homicide Division* (2002-2003), *Collateral* (2004), and *Miami Vice* (2006) – Mann has employed this technology to form increasingly spare and immediate narratives. Despite Mann’s reputation as an advocate of digital capture, during initial consultations with cinematographer Dante Spinotti he had planned to shoot *Public Enemies* (2009) – a 1930s-set gangster picture about John Dillinger – on 35 mm: “In our early discussions, Michael mentioned several times that he was thinking of going back to film,” recalls Spinotti. “He was considering it, I think, because he initially envisioned classical, more set-in-stone kind of imagery. We spent a lot of time discussing the pros and cons” (quoted in Holben, 2009). Having conducted tests of both formats, Mann asserted that the celluloid footage looked like a period film, whereas the digital material gave the impression of presentness, of being alive in 1933. “In the end it made total sense: video looks like reality, it’s more immediate, it has a *vérité* surface to it. Film has this liquid kind of surface, feels like something made up” (quoted in Patterson, 2009). Spinotti states that he and Mann “believed digital would facilitate a more dynamic use of film grammar” while providing “a hyper-realistic look.” He continues: “We wanted the look of *Public Enemies* to have a high level of realism, not an overt period feel. Among the historical aspects are a lot of action, romance and drama, and Michael and I talked about achieving an immediate feel” (quoted in Holben, 2009).

Spinotti’s statements are indicative of the expressive possibilities of digital filmmaking, most notably its application in the broad genre of historical cinema. In debates concerning the impact of digital cinema, dialectics between “realism” and “period,” between immediacy and delay, between past and present each have particular significance. Given the emphasis placed on how filmmakers want their films to be received, it is important to contextualize this evidence within a larger creative-industrial framework. In his industry study *Production Culture*, John Thornton Caldwell studies the self-representation, self-critique and self-reflection of the creative industries by examining the direct influence of the

practitioners involved. By acknowledging their impact as theorists or ethnographers, it is possible to account for their roles in creating what Caldwell defines as “critical industrial practices,” with the production communities themselves acting as cultural expressions and entities rather than mere producers of mass or popular culture. With reference to Caldwell’s paradigm for thinking about industrial self-theorizing, digital is a technological development (or, more accurately, a series of developments) that functions ecumenically in providing a greater range of aesthetic and theoretical options – and therefore solutions. New technologies bring with them their own aesthetic possibilities, allowing filmmakers to choose from a broader spectrum of alternatives. As Caldwell states, this requires that filmmakers “must of necessity be versatile and hybrid theorizers, ones that never prejudge the look of a production” (2008: 19).

Digital production tools, in their enhanced flexibility, ability to use lower light levels and increase depth of field, and their overall fluidity, connote cultural codes that are distinct from earlier production tools. Caldwell sees this as delineating between two different modes in the relationship between machines and their operators: with predigital technologies he identifies the “sense that human workers on the set are there to follow and assist machines as the machines do their work,” whereas with new production tools he determines a sense that “human workers and operators on the set are choreographed while machines are in place mostly to follow and record the interaction of operators and performers” (2008: 152-153). This shifting of agency and autonomy enabled by technology is integral to the consideration of the impact of new production contexts on the ability to construct and represent different narratives. Whereas earlier production systems depend on a highly stratified labor and craft system, digital filmmaking compresses these hierarchies to the extent that specific job titles – director of photography, camera operator, focus puller and so forth – have lesser meaning. For instance, on *Public Enemies* the flexibility of the cameras and the adoption of the DV format allowed Michael Mann to take a more hands-on approach, acting as a camera operator as well as his writing, producing and directing duties. As Caldwell asserts, when using digital the task, status and interrelationships of the worker, as well as the cultural significance of the work, “all change depending on how production technologies are used and why” (2008: 153).

As opposed to suggesting that digital leads to a dissolution of a film’s narrative structure, there is instead a shift towards a pronouncement of the image wherein it becomes more central, and temporal and spatial dimensions become secondary. Moreover, it is the absence of a structure based around time that forces an immediate narrative, and its affect becomes primarily sensory by breaking free of narrative space. While the

emphasis on the immediate nature of events in *Public Enemies* does not fully take over the narrative, it does lend particular sequences the affective sensation that action is being instantaneously experienced rather than recollected and re-narrated. The narration of historical events in the present rather than past tense places emphasis on action – on the recreation of experience – rather than on reaction and interpretation. Immediate narration is fully appropriate for narratives that wish to relay the intensity and adversity experienced by their protagonists, presenting thoughts in conjunction with actions without reaching finite conclusions. In doing so, narratives are able to present their characters' interpretations of events as they take place, thus recreating their active processes. By placing primacy on their agency, immediacy aids in the establishment of their autonomy.

Narratives of Immediacy and the Gangster Film

In recent years a tendency has emerged in modern filmmaking centered on an increased focus on the direct or instant involvement of viewers in diegetic action through "immediate" narratives that emphasize the pressing, instantaneous nature of events as achieved through a broad spectrum of aesthetic practices. In this article I employ the term immediacy to refer to narratives in which various representational strategies are employed to reduce the gap between experience and interpretation. This consists of both narrative and stylistic techniques that work to create a sense of subjectivity, typically establishing autonomy through placing primacy on the agency of the protagonist rather than being constructed through the interpretative influence of a distanced first- or third-person narrator. Narrative immediacy also relates to identity formation, in that the spontaneity of narrative events establishes both the impulsiveness and vulnerability of the protagonist, prompting a form of character affiliation. This can be evidenced in a range of genres from the action narratives of *Apocalypto* (2006) and *Act of Valor* (2012) to found-footage dramas such as *127 Hours* (2010) and *End of Watch* (2012). The exact qualities of immediacy derive from a style in which narrative situations compress lines of narration and experience to form a diegesis that advances both an emotional and experiential proximity to the characters it relates. Of course, the sensation of immediacy is itself difficult to define, being an effect that filmgoers experience entirely subjectively. This needs to be further unpacked in order to interpret why this is the case, and for this purpose I use *Public Enemies* as a specific case study. This article provides a close examination of how immediacy can be read as both a representational strategy and a narrative technique, and how the two courses bleed into one another. The particular form of immediacy in this study – that of historical immediacy – is one used to reflect the continuous condition of experiencing previous

events, as well as a method by which to explore the complex nature of historical or biographical subjects.

Films are full of invisibilities, and changes in technology make these alternately more and less visible. While digital filmmaking has had a larger influence on all genres in terms of form and style, apparatus and practitioners, not all genres have benefitted equally. A particular way of exploring a genre with a marked effect is by studying the example of the gangster film, in part due to the genre's significance on stylistic, historical and social levels. The gangster film is significant because rather than maintaining a continual presence, it tends to operate cyclically. While there is not sufficient space to consider them here, academic and popular studies of the gangster film have consistently focused on a small number of well-known films, particularly the classic gangster cycle of the 1930s, a series of key texts including *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931) and *Scarface* (1932) that Thomas Schatz identifies as explicitly conveying social messages to audiences (1981: 81-82). Moreover, the biographical gangster film of the 1950s – for example, *Baby Face Nelson* (1957), *Machine Gun Kelly* (1958) and *Al Capone* (1959) – subsequently led to the more violent and influential revisionist phase following the relaxation of the production code, exemplified by such films as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre* (1967), and *Dillinger* (1973). [1] The "retro" pastiche gangster film cycle of the 1990s, a cycle that includes *Miller's Crossing* (1990), *Bullets Over Broadway* (1994) and *The Newton Boys* (1998), is also significant, with Esther Sonnet and Peter Stanfield describing this set of films as "sharing a common concern for crime-led narratives located in *historical* rather than contemporary settings" (2005: 164). This article places the cyclic production of gangster films within the broad social, political and cultural contexts that have, until now, been largely absent from the ahistorical and archetypal accounts of the genre, and within the discourses and practices of digital filmmaking. The aim is to reinstate Hollywood gangster films within the material complexity of their production in order to illustrate how the genre has provided audiences with a rich narrative space that is dependent on how the period is represented. The study of *Public Enemies* can therefore illuminate the impact of narrative immediacy on historical cinema.

Public Enemies is the most expedient example of the genre from this transitional phase of the large-scale shift from celluloid to digital, and its particular use of the new format allows us to see a set of changes and contradictions that are not always easy to identify. Advancements and particular applications of film technology often have subliminal effects in that the differences may not be obvious. Like screen ratios, for instance, digital cinema is not external to what we understand; it may change how films affect us but does not always announce its presence, making these results harder to discuss but also worthy of greater investigation. As with

the transition from black-and-white to color film, or the move to increasingly spectacular widescreen processes, the digital-film paradigm is conceptually unclear; this shift is both crucial and invisible and, as with all forms of industry change, there will inevitably be a great deal of concern about the reception of new changes.

The directing focus of this work is the study of how new digital filmmaking technologies have been employed to create particular aesthetic techniques that enhance the sense of immediacy in films set in the distant past. More specifically, I examine how such practices operate to reflect the complex, dichotomous nature of the gangster film in terms of what filmmakers mean by "immediacy" and "realism," especially as it is clearly established that we can only talk about perceptions of realism and not actually "the real." The purpose of this study is to contribute to a fuller understanding of the flexibility and possibilities of digital technologies, and their effect on period and gangster narratives. While writers such as Lev Manovich and Janet Harbord have discussed the implications of digital production practices on narrative and visual construction, I will develop this work to show how narrative immediacy plays an important role in how filmmakers want their films to be received and experienced. The combination of narrative immediacy and digital filmmaking imparts an affect that becomes primarily sensory, therefore allowing for the representation of the complexities and ambiguities inherent in experiencing historical events.

***Public Enemies* and Digital Production Contexts**

In its particular treatment of its narrative, Michael Mann's *Public Enemies* is of great interest for several reasons: firstly, on account of its digital production context, which informs its aesthetic formulation as an immediate text; secondly, the manner in which the film, as one based on both the historical and biographical, reframes the past through this lens of the present, resulting in a more direct engagement with the *experience* of history through its subjectivity and focus on immersion. Finally, given the film's status as a historical gangster film, its relation to prior generic forms is important in terms of how the gangster film has traditionally related itself to its historical context. This article aims to work through these three distinct lines of enquiry to ascertain the representational and textual strategies involved in forming narratives of such complexity, and uses them to understand how this type of narrative can be read through its historical and generic significances.

Opening in 1933, "the golden age of bank robbery," as the opening titles state, *Public Enemies* details the last few months in the life of Depression-era outlaw John Dillinger (Johnny Depp), a criminal who became Public Enemy No. 1 for J. Edgar Hoover (Billy Crudup) and his newly-formed

Bureau of Investigation. As he and his gang are pursued across the states by agent Melvin Purvis (Christian Bale), Dillinger initiates a romantic relationship with coat-checker Billie Frechette (Marion Cotillard). Ultimately, he is tracked down in Chicago, shot and killed by Purvis' agents outside the Biograph Theater in July 1934. The film's structure is one of constant movement and flux, informing the temporal concerns of its narrative in the manner by which history itself appears to be catching up with the figure of John Dillinger. In avoiding elegy and sentimentalism in favor of a nuanced, historicised account, the film emphasizes the presentness of experiencing the past and pushes for a deeper level of immersion within its period diegesis.

As mentioned earlier, the period gangster film is a highly focused form of the genre, yet this does not diminish the expansive filmmaking possibilities involved in reworking or operating outside of generic conventions. The genre has its own history in addition to being formed *from* history, and for this reason it must be negotiated differently while a certain degree of generic conformity is inevitably maintained. In his consideration of Mann's canon, Steven Rybin believes that each film "is locatable in a distinctive film-historical genre lineage" and his style "serves as a conduit through which genre is inflected, innovated, and reformulated" (2007: 3). *Public Enemies* marks a significant juncture within Mann's oeuvre in that it joins together several cinematic and historical concerns: it focuses on a historical figure within a tumultuous period of America's past; it draws from the long history of the gangster genre, both classical and revisionist; and it signifies the application of Mann's recently developed digital filmmaking practices and aesthetics.

The Sony CineAlta F23 was chosen as the main camera with which to shoot the film, in part due to the sharpness of the image and its increased depth of field, despite a slight loss of resolution. The decision was made in order to satisfy the specific needs of capturing, in the most realistic fashion, the look of 1930s America: "To do a historical period film right [...] you need to push the limits on picture quality, detail, depth of field and exposure," says co-producer and second-unit director Bryan H. Carroll (quoted in Di Nome, 2009). Approximately 95 percent of the film was shot using the Sony F23, with the Sony PMW-EX1 used for shots that required increased mobility, such as the interiors of planes and cars during high-speed chases. **[2]** The level of control over the image was integral to creating an immediate aesthetic, together with the format's realism and uniformity, achieved through a variety of technical aspects: control over focus and depth of field, and direct manipulation of the image, such as color timing and saturation. The camera was also able to shoot in low-light situations due to its increased elasticity and higher light sensitivity. The film's nighttime action and exteriors were important factors in formulating a practical approach to shooting these scenes and

making use of complex lighting set-ups. For instance, during Purvis' late night ambush on Little Bohemia, a small lodge in Manitowish Waters, Wisconsin at which Dillinger and his gang are hiding following a bank robbery, the flashes of light emitted from the barrels of the machine guns serve to light the faces of the actors. The punctuations of gunfire during the pursuit briefly cast a strong light on objects in the frame, contributing to the kinesthetic quality of the night scenes and granting the image a level of heightened realism.

As Spinotti's testimony makes clear, there is an important change of emphasis here in moving from celluloid to digital, in the filmmakers looking to achieve a definitive sense of immediacy rather than that of a period film, thus creating a tension between the modern storytelling tools and the historical nature of the narrative. The three films that Michael Mann has shot in the digital format (*Collateral*, *Miami Vice*, *Public Enemies*) have a noticeable and recognizable aesthetic that has evolved into a central visual signifier. While more refined and higher-specification cameras are now available, [3] Mann's films look as if they were shot on digital video rather than attempting to replicate the *feel* of film: the depth of field extends further, opening out the image to subjective focus, while action and movement often appears rather jarred or fragmented. Deep staging works to amplify the focal points of the shot, with rack focusing frequently employed to subtly draw the long shot and extreme close-up together. These elements are evident from the very start of *Public Enemies*, beginning *in medias res* as Dillinger stages an audacious prison break-in and escape, capturing details such as the reflections on the surface of Dillinger's car and the clouds in the sky with startling clarity. The distinction of these extensive details is achieved in part due to the intentional underlighting of scenes to create a more realistic tone in low-light situations, yet is undercut by the motion of the handheld camera and the sharp shifts of focus. These stylistic contradictions expose Mann's ostentatious use of the camera as a *digital* tool that informs a particular aesthetic choice, one that operates alongside the specific practical and financial benefits offered by the format.

In signalling how shifting technological contexts can inform changes in narrative construction, it is important to avoid a technologically deterministic viewpoint that presumes technology drives the development and production of cultural forms. Instead, it is possible to identify how digital filmmaking practices have been appropriated by filmmakers in particular ways, with digital practices being seen as enhancement tools that make available new forms of stylistic expression. This is in contrast to reading them as enabling radical advancements for artistic creativity. For instance, Janet Harbord criticizes the latent technological determinism of theses that propose a shifted structure of perception attributable to cinema – from those of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer to, more

recently, Leo Charney and Anne Friedberg – because we need to understand the different ways technology is employed by different filmmakers, and the subsequent audiences that place value on the products themselves (2002: 32-33). By avoiding the characterization of the specific and reductive aesthetic attributes of a particular production technology and their application to all the uses of this technology, one acknowledges that digital production has travelled through a range of film cultures – from Dogme and other independent cinemas to modern auteurs, mainstream and then 3D filmmaking – and has been employed differently in each production context. Digital video is a medium that allows for greater freedom, both logistically and creatively, in affording different aesthetic possibilities, being more flexible at the level of both production and post-production. The flexibility of the format allows for a more continuous, uninterrupted shooting process, given the faster reloading and resetting times, and it is typically more cost-effective than shooting on film.

The stylistic departures of *Public Enemies* can be better identified by contrasting it with other gangster films from the same production period. Indeed, its visualization of the past as the absolute present is so challenging because of the extent to which cinema audiences have absorbed and anticipate the fabricated reality of classical film style in its aesthetics and editing strategies, especially concerning historical narratives. *Road to Perdition* (2002), for example, conforms to classical film style in terms of its emphasis on consummate production design and a muted color palette, with cinematographer Conrad L. Hall using dark backgrounds and sets to give it a desaturated, noirish quality (Zone, 2002). The film's stylized lighting used low levels of light to produce heavy shadows, creating a greater sense of contrast through chiaroscuro. It also features largely symmetrical shot compositions and steady camera movements, achieved through the use of dollies and cranes, as well as maintaining a narrow depth of field. Clint Eastwood has employed a similarly classical film style in his recent period pieces, such as *Changeling* (2009), a drama set in 1920s Los Angeles, and *J. Edgar* (2011), a biopic of Hoover that covers the period 1919-1972. Rob Lorenz, producer of *J. Edgar*, suggests that the film, in its classical style and with Eastwood's traditionalist approach, represents "the way they used to make movies," being "heavily dependent on proper art direction and practical techniques" (quoted in Goldman, 2011). This classical stylistic approach has also been taken in another recent gangster text, the television series *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–), set during the Prohibition era. Shot on Super 35, the series also favors dolly and crane shots over the use of Steadicam as pilot director and executive producer Martin Scorsese did not want movement to be "too noticeable," and it avoids a vibrant palette in order to "quietly capture the tone of the period and support the story" (Thomson, 2010).

In *Public Enemies*, digital is utilized to complement the immediacy and thematic principles of the narrative, unveiling different narrative dimensions in the atypical visual presentation of the period. Of this, Mann says:

I shot in HD for a reason. My objective wasn't to have people look at a period film, I wanted the audience to be involved in the film. I wanted it to feel like it had all the complexity of what it was like in that period of time. I didn't want people to watch it from a distance, I wanted them to have an intimate connection to those times and for those times to have an impact on people. (Quoted in Anon., 2009)

It is interesting to note that Mann speaks of intimacy and impact when referring to digital video, as if he has been freed from the restrictions of film, suggesting that the format allows for a greater level of experimentation and improvisation. The film's use of style seems to be born out of a desire for a form of realism not usually found within the genre – that of historical rather than social realism – with the shift to digital supporting the visual break from generic norms. [4] The effect of this style can be both impactful but also considerably jarring, especially for those who have not encountered or are not accustomed to the experience of digital projection, setting up a dichotomy between immersion and distraction. Mann avoids the visual and folkloric iconography of both the classical gangster era and its revisionist phase, [5] with his alternate approach informed by his decision to shoot the movie digitally: he states that the use of high definition “determined the range of choices on the surfaces of everything: set decoration, wallpaper, fabrics, clothes, everything” (quoted in Patterson, 2009). While recent depictions of this era have used shallow depth of field and static camera positioning or fixed motion to emphasize the artistry of set decoration and period costuming, Mann means to intensify these aspects of *mise-en-scène* in order to present a more “realistic,” immersive version of the past.

Immersion, Realism and the Digital

In *Production Culture*, Caldwell identifies a set of technical practices that demonstrates an “immersive urge” in production worker self-representations, technical design and onscreen style. More specifically, he sees the design and use of these tools as serving the “desire to move deeply into the image” (2008: 167). [6] Digital cameras, in their design and employment, can achieve even greater immersive forms of spatial experience, and Caldwell believes that it is the “appetite for immersion” that has “stimulated research and development in contemporary camera design” (*Ibid.*). My approach involves examining how these immersive

practices – the probing camerawork, the use of handheld operating systems, and tendencies towards tighter framing and utilizing greater depth of field – has had an effect on historical narratives by entering into and moving within the highly-specific, deep space of the past.

Caldwell seems to assert that in order to achieve greater immersion there must be a disconnection between camera and operator, a detachment evident in the range of autonomous and highly mobile camera eyes that cinematographers operate remotely from a distance. Rather than shifting away from human-scale subjectivity to a variety of “disembodied, highly mobile, autonomous, aerial camera-eye configurations” (Caldwell, 2008: 169), I would argue that digital cameras have allowed for embodied subjectivity on a more realistic scale, one that comprises features of mobility and autonomy but that also communicates the implicit relationship between camera eye and operator eye. However, while *Public Enemies* used a more cost-effective and expeditious format for shooting and editing, unlike TV productions this did not result in a cheaper or faster production, with the film taking 80 days to shoot and costing \$100 million. Despite the reduction of costs in terms of equipment (dollies/cranes), lighting, and negative costs, the film was shot on location in several cities in Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana (including many historical sites), featured an ensemble cast (with three star leads), and had a historical setting that demanded particular attention to art and set decoration as well as period costuming and makeup. Accordingly, while Caldwell identifies how digital can result in speedier and more cost-effective productions (analogous to digital postproduction practices), in the case of *Public Enemies* the adoption of new digital filmmaking technologies has not been combined with a radical change in production practice, in part due to the film’s status as a Hollywood blockbuster and its cost-intensive historical narrative.

Imbuing the gangster genre with immediacy requires a complex restructuring of its visual tropes. Immediacy, therefore, is a primary aesthetic strategy with which particular historical moments can be brought to vivid life, characterized in *Public Enemies* by spontaneous perspectives and the camera’s fluidity of expression that lend its historical recreations greater power. The use of the terms “realism,” “immediacy,” and “hyperrealism” have some virtue on a descriptive level, but their theoretical relations with film are more complex. As Christopher Williams notes, both realist and anti-realist arguments are mutually interdependent as they are both committed to notions of truth. While not personally asserting that film is a truthful illusion, Williams does comment that “[r]ealism is defined as coherence; the internal truth of varying sets of conventions” (1980: 79). By tracing the complex relationship between aesthetics and technology through the ideas of several critics and filmmakers (Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Epstein, Jean Renoir and Roberto

Rossellini), Williams iterates both the reciprocal reproduction of film and life, and the fact that the concept of realism in cinema is always contingent on defining itself against previous styles. Thus, the filmmakers seem to suggest that digital video is a "more real" system of capturing images and action, thereby allowing them to create a more accurate depiction of the past. The binary opposition Spinotti suggests between "realism" and a "period feel" is a distinction that suggests that a period film does not sufficiently capture the intricacies of the past, perhaps because it is too mediated, idealistic or bounded by genre conventions and classical film style.

The status of films as documents – ones narrated and received by no one person in particular – links them only indirectly to the realities they are supposed to be documenting: for Williams, films fulfil a realist function by "tell[ing] their truths within the framework of the particular set of languages available to them" (1980: 6). In this process, filming equipment can be seen as an obstacle to achieving this realism, which has resulted in investment in "ever smaller and more manageable equipment that can be handled by fewer and fewer people" (ibid: 7). While this can be evidenced in the production scale of *Public Enemies*, with the increased flexibility of digital production incorporated within both the film's style and the immediacy of its narrative, its aesthetic conflict is not generated by the distinction between "the characteristics of the material itself and the manner of filming it," that Williams identifies, but by the clash of the film's modern aesthetic and its period setting.

Digital realism relates to the way a viewer relates what is seen on screen to what is seen in real life; both concern individual perception. Nicholas Rombes sees traditional cinematic syntax, such as shot selection, cross-cutting, montage, fades, dissolves, ellipses and other filming and editing strategies, as "responses not to a certain way of seeing images, but to a certain way of making them" (2009: 21). In contrast to these "expressions of technology," digital images and compositions more accurately reflect expressions of reality in that digital technologies make "moving images more natural in the sense that they correspond more closely than ever before to our experience of everyday reality" (*Ibid.*). The use of natural lighting and handheld camerawork do not immediately result in a total reversioning of lighting and *mise-en-scène* styles, but may position characters, actions and objects in a more natural manner. Yet while it seems more naturalistic in terms of its interpretation of light and objects, it also makes viewers aware – and indeed constantly reminds them – of the technology involved in making its immediate depiction of reality possible. In attempting to depict events informally, digital films have a tendency to draw attention to the makeup of its formalism, and this is the fundamental paradox of the digital. This dilemma relates to the dialectic between immediacy and what Jay David Bolter and Richard

Grusin call “hypermediacy,” a paradigm that describes how the push in new media technologies to create greater immediacy and presence within the text frequently provokes an awareness of the construction of the artifice (1999: 31-44). This hypermedial reminder of the technologies involved in creating a media text subsequently counters its immersive intent, and highlights the mediation of the “realistic” experience.

Mann’s conception of realism seems to result from a combination of historical recreation, dramatic reenactment, and dedicated research, but is compromised (to an extent) by the artifice inherent in digital production, such as the heightened detail of the image, the movement and positioning of the camera, and the editing of the film. [7] This set of theoretical and practical contradictions is central to what makes *Public Enemies* such an intriguing example of both historical cinema and the gangster genre. Rybin explores this dynamic, identifying an uneasy balance between the acknowledgment of a film’s own artificial construction and Mann’s personal interest in presenting the realistic detail of the carefully researched dramatic situations:

The result is rather a kind of amplification of a certain sense of reality presented within and through the bounds of genre, a reality which cannot exist outside of the image itself and which is enabled by convention, but which nonetheless has its moorings in a particular understanding of the world outside of film. (Rybin, 2007: 190)

Rybin here draws connections between the ontological artifice of the digital and the inherent realism of Mann’s subject matter, a convergence that results in a style that approaches hyperrealism. In the case of *Public Enemies*, the film’s digital production is reflected in both its style and its narrative, with a central emphasis on the immediate experience of history. Not only does this signify a reinvigoration of historical aspects of the gangster film, but it also demonstrates a deliberate subversion of generic visual style to create a level of heightened realism.

Visual Styles of the Period Aesthetic

The stylized period aesthetic of *Public Enemies* is best evidenced in scenes of action that grant a sense of subjectivity to the experience of events. These characteristics extend to other more static or restrained scenes, but the film’s combat sequences most clearly amalgamate these elements, such as in the scenes of bank robbery, escape (the flight from Little Bohemia), and the climactic shooting of Dillinger outside the Biograph Theater. The stylistic presentation of these scenes align closely with David Bordwell’s notion of “intensified continuity,” a now familiar concept that argues that while cinema’s visual style generally adheres to

the principles of classical filmmaking in terms of representing space, time and narrative relations, a new style has emerged that amounts to an intensification of established visual and editing techniques. For Bordwell, "[i]ntensified continuity is traditional continuity amped up, raised to a higher pitch of emphasis. It is the dominant style of American mass-audience films today" (2002: 16). This style is encapsulated by four significant changes in camerawork and editing: closer framing, bipolar extremes of lens lengths, a free-ranging camera and faster cutting.

Bordwell questions whether this has led to a post-classical breakdown of spatial continuity. It can be argued that the digital – in terms of both filmmaking practices and aesthetic constructions – further amplifies the features that Bordwell identifies. For instance, Bordwell notes that some action sequences are cut so fast as to make the action itself incomprehensible yet retain a spatial coherence. This editing style is similarly evident in *Public Enemies*, exacerbated by the roving, frenetic quality of the film's visual style. Digital cinematography has also altered the use of variable lens lengths for different shots: long-focus lenses can be used for close-ups, medium shots and establishing shots, resulting from the possibilities for greater depth of field. The mobility of the digital camera further allows for a certain non-uniform approach to framing. Caldwell describes the hyperactive camera and editing styles synonymous with intensified continuity as having a "hit-and-run feel," a kinetic and present quality that works against the staged or rehearsed sense of more formal film/TV productions (2008: 174). The stylistic result of this approach is a quasi-documentary aesthetic, shooting quickly and proximate to the actors. However, with film productions the emphasis on coverage is even higher, thereby avoiding some of the editing dilemmas of documentaries such as breaks in spatial continuity and screen direction.

Public Enemies demonstrates several of these post-continuity stylistic tendencies, though often the presentation of scenes does not so much violate continuity as fragment it. Mann draws attention to the technical extravagance of shooting a period film on digital, indulging in the "overt narration" and "flamboyant displays of technique" that Bordwell claims is typical of contemporary Hollywood style (2002: 25). It is particularly fond of the "push-in" whereby the camera tracks up to the actor's face, a movement that often underscores a moment of realization but also builds continuous tension, especially when coupled with a shot/reverse-shot passage. This is significant in that what was once reserved for moments of particular significance or purpose can now belong to a heightened normalcy, merely part of the assembled tapestry of a scene that may be legible, illegible or both. This amplification of the ordinary commands greater attention and suggests further insight into the characters' experiential interpretations, and is combined with the inherent

hyperrealism of digital cinematography. For instance, during the sequence in which Dillinger leaves the Biograph and is pursued by Purvis and his agents, the use of slow motion in combination with the push-in conveys the burden of his movements and, in a way, his whole mythology, presenting both the magisterial inevitability of Dillinger's death and his growing awareness of the violent confrontation that awaits him. While audiences have become accustomed to the use of features of intensified continuity to convey recent events – as in the case of *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), for example – this is problematized when dealing with events further in the past. In this instance, the increasing disjuncture between form and content leads us to question the historical intentions for which the filmmakers were striving, namely the immediacy and experiencing of historical events.

Scenes of action in the film demonstrate a series of techniques used to create the layered, immediate experience. By way of example, the bank robberies are made up of a series of very quick cuts, including reaction shots comprised of both close-ups and extreme close-ups that give the impression of a double take, a moment of surprise and alarm, such as when Homer Van Meter (Stephen Dorff) detects the appearance of a police officer outside the bank. These shots last for less than a second, symptomatic of Mann's intensified approach to shooting scenes of this nature, imparting a chaotic, fragmented observational presentness to the action. Moreover, the start of the second major heist sequence, perpetrated by Dillinger and Baby Face Nelson (Stephen Graham) at Sioux Falls, is signalled by the shooting of a police officer with no prior establishing shot. Both interior and exterior shots feature a series of eye-level, handheld camera moves that draw attention to its presence within the group, giving the impression that we are jostling amongst the throng of robbers, tellers and customers. This is complemented by reverse shots that focus on the faces of the criminals, isolating their presence but also emphasizing their awareness and registering of the actions around them, with focus shifts revealing further detail in the eyes and facial expressions. In spatial terms, while the bandit group is framed to emphasize proximity and integration, the antagonistic side of the scene is shot to accentuate distance. When Dillinger exits the bank, the sequence of him firing his Tommy gun at a building across the street consists of a series of proximal, almost first-person point-of-view shots that is complemented by the deep staging of the reverse shot as he is fired upon by the police.

These scenes demonstrate, through the lack of establishing shots and the positioning and movement of the handheld camera, the effect of locating the audience *within* this experience in terms of conveying the experiences of the bank robbers consisting of their emotional and intellectual perception. This style, with its emphasis on point of view, frantic motion

and focus on specific details, seems closely associated with the probing camera and *cinéma vérité* look of documentary. However, this is somewhat counteracted by the rapid editing and short average shot length that are characteristic of mainstream cinematic technique. The handheld, proximal approach to the faces of the actors, shot with long lenses from a few feet away, together with a collective subjectivity, provides a real-time immediacy and a sense of witnessing the events taking place. Mann states that he wished to "locate an audience immediately within the frame of his existence and to experience some of that rush of ... where's this going? What're you doing? You're not going to live forever" (quoted in Patterson, 2009; ellipsis in original), [8] giving Dillinger an intense trajectory throughout the course of the film. Mann talks about locating an audience within this experience in the most detailed manner possible, yet there is a polarizing difference of opinion between those who find this form of digital distracting and alienating, and those who see the film as achieving the desired sense of immersion in realizing the era with greater clarity. [9] The digital aesthetic, in its incongruity, may compromise the illusion of period reality, yet this technology is also able to elucidate the flaws, interruptions and inaccuracies of human perception. [10] If we are to accept that any representation of the past, visual or otherwise, is inevitably inconsistent, subjective and disputable, then the stylistic possibilities that derive from digital filmmaking can be seen to depict the present experience of the past in a manner that communicates its humanistic imperfections through a more stringent eye.

The film's emphasis on immediacy is further reflected in the lack of character development over the course of the diegesis. Unlike Mann's earlier work in which identity is clearly established and subsequently challenged, such as the key thematic conflict between professional thief Neil McCauley (Robert De Niro) and homicide detective Vincent Hanna (Al Pacino) in *Heat* (1995), the world of *Public Enemies* is one of constant motion that grants neither the time nor the space for personal identities to be determined or developed. The perpetual withdrawal back into the volatile criminal world of hyperawareness is represented through the fabricated (often pseudonymous) identities that are imposed on the characters by their profession. This inauthenticity of identity is both successful and alienating, evidenced in Dillinger's visit to the offices of the Chicago Police Department's "Dillinger Squad," where he impudently surveys the collated materials on his associates. Confronted with the knowledge that all of his allies have either been killed or captured, he insouciantly asks the officers present what the baseball score is, yet they fail to recognize him. Verbal exchanges in the film are as terse and mechanical as the scenes of bank robbery, with the dialogue being predominantly expository and supporting the immediate nature of the narrative in terms of eschewing traditional forms of character

development. This method of narrative engagement through diegetic distancing is reflected in Dillinger's own experience of viewing *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934) at the Biograph shortly before his death at the close of the film.

Mann appears to be fascinated by a particular type of character – recurrently, but not exclusively, criminals – who live by impulse and retain an essential focus on the present. Individuals such as Frank (James Caan) in *Thief* (1981), McCauley in *Heat*, or Sonny Crockett (Colin Farrell) in *Miami Vice* live according to the same maxim of “time is luck.” Discussing his own future with gang leader Alvin Karpis (Giovanni Ribisi) in a Chicago ballroom after the film's opening bank robbery, Dillinger resists contemplating what lies ahead: “We're having too good a time today. We ain't thinking about tomorrow.” Dillinger is perpetually rooted in the present, and though we see little of his preparation, we are witness to how he conducts perfect bank heists and makes clean getaways, while also crafting a public persona as a “man of the people.” His transitory nature and constant evasion of stasis mark him out as an individual who is moving away from the past – one that remains largely abstruse and ambivalent within the film's narrative – rather than towards the future. Indeed, in the few moments of rest, leisure or relaxation in the film, Dillinger's world is interrupted or assaulted: he is captured in his hotel in Tucson, Arizona, ambushed at Little Bohemia, and killed when visiting the Biograph Theater in Chicago.

It is soon after stating his desire for immediate pleasures that Dillinger meets Frechette, and after a brief courtship he is eager to label her as “his girl,” evidence of a level of instant fulfilment that parallels his criminal success. He demonstrates an unreserved candour about his condition; when Frechette asks him during their first date what he wants (from life) he replies pithily, “Everything. Right now,” causing Billie to exclaim, “Boy, you're in a hurry.” The instigation of this romance simultaneously supports and challenges this notion of immediacy as the incessant forward motion of Dillinger is almost temporarily disrupted by her presence, breaking the deterministic flux and forcing him to reassess where he stands in both public and private spheres. Yet this also seems to be a fantasy, and Dillinger's reassurance that they are not in danger – “I ain't going anywhere, and neither are you. I'm going to die an old man in your arms,” he tells her during a stay in Florida – is hard to read as anything other than self-delusion and performance, given that the manner of his death is one of the most familiar aspects of his mythology.

Conclusions

The purpose of narrative immediacy seems to be to blur the distinctions between the present and the near-present, and thus the implications for

the period film are hard to ascertain. Filmmakers utilize immediate narration not for compromise or closure but to portray the experiencing of events, and digital has a hyperreal quality that problematizes the ability to distinguish reality from its simulation. The immediacy that characterizes this type of narrative signifies agency achieved by the protagonists, thus portraying authentic-seeming individual actions. Dillinger's forward-thinking nature and inherent fatalism inform the film's immediacy, but the narrative also contains brief moments of personal reflection, as if to dismiss them in favor of this immediacy. By evoking the immediacy of experience while maintaining a small retrospective element, the film acknowledges the presence of the past while choosing to obfuscate its meaning or relevance. There are far more instances of immediate action than there are of retrospective reflection in the film, and narrative immediacy plays a key role in portraying the present consciousness of the protagonists and their experiencing of past events. The practice of giving past experiences immediacy through a heightened visual depiction is an integral form of ascribing meaning and value to these experiences, and the evocation of immediacy is one way of re-envisioning and revitalizing modes of past expression.

The clash of the period events and digital filmmaking exposes a set of inherent contradictions between the present and the past, the modern and the classical, and the contrast between the reality of historical events and the artifice of digital filmmaking. The digital imagery of *Public Enemies* is atypical of the genre, presenting a new range of iconography that depicts the past with greater immersive intent. The combination of digital photography and fast editing further amplifies features of intensified continuity, especially apparent given the film's period setting and its deliberately disjunctive formal style. High-definition digital cameras can be utilized for immersive purposes due to their ease of access into and through interpersonal spaces. The choice of camera, its mounting devices and the manner of its movement all inscribe the apparatus with specific stylistic and cultural characteristics that demonstrate a preoccupation with immersive forms. The increased number of stylistic options granted by digital formats can, however, be problematic, and perhaps account for the discordant reactions to the digital period aesthetic of *Public Enemies*. The purpose of the kineticized, free-flowing visual style of the film, according to the filmmakers, is to encourage vicarious involvement in the spatial and temporal parameters of the recreated period. In turn, this allows for a heightened degree of immersion and attachment, and serves an expressive purpose in the hyperreal clarity of images and the exploration of historical and interpersonal spaces. The unconventional emphasis of artifice to convey realism reinforces the film's desire for urgency, projecting the past into the immediate present. This embracing of new notions of genre and historicism, achieved through a combination of digital production, forms

of historical reenactment, and the recognition of previous generic forms within a narrative of immediacy, illustrates how the digital can allow for enhanced engagements with the past.

Notes

[1] See Mason (2002: 120-140), and Shadoian (2003: 236-253).

[2] The film also made minor use of non-digital cameras, namely the Arriflex 235 and the Arriflex 435, small, lightweight cameras designed for handheld and remote applications.

[3] The use of high-end cameras such as the Arri Alexa and Red Epic for both large and small productions demonstrates how quickly camera technology has developed over recent years.

[4] The realism of the classical gangster cycle, for instance, was part of a concerted attempt to address the real social problems and experiences of the Depression era for audiences. See Munby (1999: 39-65), Mason (2002: 1-50) and Shadoian (2003: 29-61).

[5] For instance, *Public Enemies* eschews the iconography and vernacular established by the Warner Bros. and RKO gangster films of the 1930s and 1940s in favor of a more historical account of Dillinger's last few months. In doing so, it also avoids the straightforward biographical approach of progenitors such as *Dillinger* (1945 and 1973) or nostalgic mythologies such as *Bonnie and Clyde*. A good example of its closer adherence to historical record is the representation of Anna Sage (Branka Katić) – known as the “Lady in Red”—who betrayed Dillinger by informing the Bureau of his whereabouts and accompanying him to the Biograph. In actuality, she wore an orange skirt, and the depiction of this in the film thus serves to refute the Dillinger mythology.

[6] In his study, Caldwell focuses on the impact of the video assist and the Steadicam in enabling immersive production styles.

[7] Regarding the relationship between realism and technology, Michael Allen notes, “[t]he drive behind much of the technological development in cinema since 1950 has been towards both a greater or heightened sense of ‘realism’ and a bigger, more breathtaking realization of spectacle” (1998: 127).

[8] See also Prokopy (2009).

[9] For instance, while David Denby writes that the film's “high-definition digital images are crisply focussed” (Denby, 2009), Ty Burr states that

"the director's decision to shoot on high-definition video has become a liability by this point, with lights in the night-time sequences overmodulating and bleeding onto the film like cheap camcorder shots" (Burr, 2009). Other critics are more undecided: Todd McCarthy, for example, opines that its style "justifies the time and attention to detail involved in creating it"; but he also acknowledges that HD has both advantages and disadvantages, stating that "the detail and depth of field are phenomenal in the dark scenes, but the bright flaring, occasional unnatural movements and excessive detailing of skin flaws remain annoying, as does the insubstantiality of the images compared to those created on film" (McCarthy, 2009).

[10] Nicholas Rombes refers to the accidental and deliberate imperfections inherent in new digital filmmaking forms as forming what he calls "DV humanism," a warm aesthetic that contradicts the "cold logic of the code" or the "deep distrust of the everyday world" (2009: 28).

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