

Notebook Feature

Hot Thoughts, Part Deux: On Michael Mann's "Heat 2"

Mann's novel, co-written with Meg Gardiner, is a vibe-forward bildungsroman for a world built on misdirection.

J.D. Connor • 14 NOV 2022



Michael Mann most recently directed the pilot for *Tokyo Vice* (HBO Max; Mann is shooting *Ferrari* now). His direction was characteristically efficient and vibey, less concerned with conveying the mechanics of any plot point than in displaying the consequences of maximum pressure on individuals in systems beyond their control. You know, Michael Mann stuff.

In one sequence, Ansel Elgort—an actor seemingly incapable of insinuating—takes a difficult test to qualify to be a reporter at *Yomiuri Shimbun*. The situation is stressful—a white guy trying to break into

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HEAT

Michael Mann

Japan's largest and most storied newspaper. But the scene is just a guy in a room taking a standardized test. This is not what one would think of as "must-see TV." Yet Mann devotes nearly four minutes to it, catching unexpected angles on Elgort's face and neck, watching that elegant Elgort hair flop casually even though the character is up against it. What Mann is doing here is forcing us to attend to the performance of intensity, to all those moments when Elgort's character knows things or doesn't know them, when he searches for an answer and when he completely blows it. The physical stakes are minute, but for his soul, it's all on the line. The scene worked for me.

The remainder of the first season of *Tokyo Vice* can be understood as a sustained exercise in forgetting everything Mann attempted to convey about the relationship between elision and immersion by filling in all the backstory and by having people talk things out in utterly un-strategic ways.

Which leads to the question of whether *Heat 2*—the new novel Mann has co-written with seasoned crime writer Meg Gardiner—is the same sort of mistake, since it offers, as Mann explains, "the *before* and the *after* of the film," the "deep biographies" of the central characters, the "not yet"s of Hanna and McCauley. (Yes, I am taking this from the back cover.) I don't think it *is* that sort of mistake; I think it tests out that kind of mistake.

John le Carré had a great line: "When people tell me I am a genre writer, I can only reply, 'Yes, but the Cold War was a genre war.'" The usual understanding of that line is that le Carré was just going after the big picture, and that if the Cold War had been different, it would have called for a different sort of writing,

and he would have been happy to provide it. *He knew what he was doing*. In *Heat 2* Mann is trying to see if he knows what he is doing when he writes a novel, especially a novel that could be so little more than the before and after of the movie.

Obviously *Heat 2* is a sequel. For a filmmaker of Mann's generation, the most credible, most monumental sequel was *The Godfather: Part II*. Unburdened by our contemporary Hollywood's massive investments in continuity, Coppola's film could be both sequel and prequel rolled into one. It could take the climactic montage from the first movie—the one where Michael's revenge explodes across New York—and extend it in time and space. It could cast De Niro as Pacino's dad. And it could push even harder on the misogyny of the whole enterprise.

It's a truism that *Heat* (1995) delivered the encounters between De Niro and Pacino that *Godfather: Part II* could not. The diner scene may have been lifted almost verbatim from Mann's earlier *L.A. Takedown* (1989), but with those stars, at that moment in their careers, the scene was entirely remotivated. We watch actors *and* characters, surface and depth, and depth again.

Heat 2 delivers their pasts and gives us a *Godfather: Part II*-y timeline. It would be almost impossible to stage effectively since it needs a younger De Niro (as Neil McCauley) and two younger Pacinos (Vincent Hanna, one pre-*Heat*, one just post—a moment now 25 years past). Most of all, though, it needs a Val Kilmer (Chris Shiherlis) still at the peak of his leonine dissolution: utterly reliable on the hunt; just figuring out that he can no longer let himself collapse between jobs.

But unlike *Godfather: Part II*, *Heat 2* is actually a novel —not a screenplay in prose form. Nor is it a mere novelization, although like a novelization it is haunted and energized by the specific performances from the movie. Mann and Gardiner take advantage of some of the novel form's obvious strengths: There are no budgetary limits on the page; there are no impossible locations, no time horizons that can't easily be conveyed, no actors who need to be de-aged or recast.



The resulting book reads in part as a summation of Mann's career-spanning concerns. Some of those are thematic. In its Chicago flashbacks to Hanna and McCauley's early career, *Heat 2* sits easily alongside Mann's early *Thief* and the cult of professionalism. In its post-*Heat* material where Chris rises to new levels of power in a world shaped by digital technology, it lives alongside *Blackhat*. Like all of his work, it strives to be rigorously accurate. Reading about muzzle velocities and chipsets creates a whiff of Tom-Clancy-ism, but only a whiff, because the things that bring vitality to Mann's work lie elsewhere.

Where? In design and in our experience of understanding. On the design side, we get flashes of Mann's pictorial commitments, the "Mann look" in prose: "Night strobes between slats of blinds, intermittent pink and blue neon from the Korean corner mall outside." (How much of this is Gardiner

expertly channeling Mann I don't know.) There is an extended sequence at a motel that is unmatched in its ability to convey the operational situation of the heist as it goes down, and as it goes awry. The telegraphic walkie-talkie chatter from the armored car robbery that opens *Heat* crosses with strings of crisp nouns to convey, as in a swift montage, thinking through a concrete situation.

Michael looks at him sharply. 'Where?'

Two options.

One: They can go out the motel room door onto the exterior walkway.

Into the radio, he says, 'Status.'

Marcos comes back, his voice stressed. 'Two men are running along the walkway. Shotguns.'

Two: In the back wall of this room, by the bathroom door, there's a hole bashed in the plaster.

That's the efficiency on display even in *Tokyo Vice*.

As for the vibes, what I called "experience of understanding" sounds complicated, but in Mann's films, it's often as simple as a tight shot from behind our star, just over his shoulder, usually displaying a superb haircut (à la Johnny Depp in *Public Enemies*) and giving us the sense that the action that is about to unfurl is being thought through inside that head. In *Tokyo Vice*, it appears in the editing of Elgort's answers, when they flow and when they stall.

In *Heat 2*, instead of pictures we get bits of reflexivity so effortless they hardly register as anything more than ordinary noir-y, interior monologue: "He didn't trust himself on the 405," Chris thinks. His body is a mess from getting shot in the clavicle. He is doped up and in pain; he's lost his family, and the rest of his social world is hanging by a thread. He needs to

drive. He knows the situation on the 405 and thinks, as any of us in LA might think, "Enh, surface streets are slower but I know their rhythms and they are easier." The prose is a verdict about Chris's estimation of himself. It reads as easy, but it can simultaneously be read in a much more abstract register.

Men taking the measure of themselves and their enemies: this is the heart of Mann's strategic thinking. These men are often, maybe even usually, wrong. The stories spin out of how they recover, and (usually) which women understand them and come along for the ride. (These women usually lose their brothers or partners along the way, but that is a topic for another time.)



So Chris rebuilds himself and gains a sense of the whole megillah. In the wake of *Heat's* bank robbery and urban warfare, Chris has been spirited to Mexicali and then, a hundred and some pages later, he lands in Ciudad del Este, at the Triple Frontier by the Iguazu Falls. Ana, the LSE-educated daughter of a Chinese organized crime family based in the freeport, offers Chris a vision of a total, global, illicit market. He is awestruck and his thoughts turn immediately toward the highest reaches of abstraction: "You make your fate," he thinks. "Your intelligence, discipline, and willingness to engage in all forms of violence are the functions that determine whether you survive. Chris has never felt

so free. He's walking through a small door into CinemaScope, exile has transformed into revelation." His omniscience and the novel's fluid passage from second to third person POV complement each other.

At this point he is radiating total competence, and back in LA, Nate—the 70s holdout played by Jon Voight in the movie—can tell. This is how *Heat 2* describes that recognition: "Nate was expecting a volatile demand. Insistence. This man is tightly put together now. Linear. Tuned in to a lot more than he lets on." "Linear" and "tight," at that same moment Chris will be driven by the same inexorable need for revenge that caused Neil to circle back to kill Waingro, that keeps Hanna locked in on the crew that killed his partner. This is the elemental stuff, the law-of-the-jungle stuff that, when it doesn't work, comes off as retread machismo, and when it does work, seems to explain how it is that the global market system gets people to work so damn hard to drive it forward.

Most surprisingly, perhaps, the novel does not adopt the usual genre convention of holding its protagonists nearly constant in order to register the transformations around them. Such anchor characters may have a great revelation (usually to kick off Act 3), but they rarely make the double-move of fitful progress, or abortive realization, or learn the hard way, or backslide. In that sense, *Heat 2* is also a departure from most of Mann's cinema, which tends toward the one-big-change model of character development. In attempting to grapple with decades of global economic revolution, Mann and Gardiner give us characters who are as contingent as the systems that shape them.

Heat 2 officially dropped August 9; on September 3,

the *New York Times* [published a deep dive](#) explaining "How Fake GPS Coordinates Are Leading to Lawlessness on the High Seas." GPS spoofing, they note, "has existed for decades, but was previously confined to military use.... In the past two years, however, military grade AIS transponders, or at least the software that replicates its effects, appear to have become available for sale on the black market, spreading rapidly among dealers of sanctioned and illicit goods."

Tankers carrying oil from sanctioned nations, drug shipments, anything anyone wants to keep quiet but needs to ship can now be cloaked this way, and a new round of countermeasures has been launched to try to curtail the practice. With GPS spoofing, the world becomes slightly less knowable, and the paranoia that drove movies such as *Enemy of the State* or the Bourne franchise is revealed to be a moment in an ongoing struggle between transparency and concealment.

Of course Michael Mann and Meg Gardiner know this. GPS spoofing software is the tech at the heart of *Heat 2*'s international turn, the pivot that will take Chris from dependable foot soldier to CinemaScopic visionary without getting bogged down in useless paranoia. Along the way, Chris will lose some of his ability to register those caught up in the grand drift with less access to The Linear. Gone are the moments of banter and command he shares with the Mexican woman Nate has arranged to drive him across the border to escape LA. Rather, *Heat 2* is a bildungsroman for a world built on violence, strategy, and misdirection. What it fills in about its characters is not simply why these people think and do the things they think and do. Those thoughts and actions are themselves shaped by interactions and

contexts that are changing just as decisively. Sure, it's a genre novel, and it ends with the laconic wit we want out of it—the war between cops and robbers is a genre war. But the nearly meme-able finale with Vincent Hanna is itself a misdirection. The real war happens almost in the margins a few pages earlier: "Workers scatter. Outside, gunshots multiply."



Tags

Michael Mann / Meg Gardiner / Books



Mac

4 days ago

Why are you guys wasting so much time and energy on what is essentially a mediocre beach novel that wasn't even written by Mann? I don't understand. I guess I won't. Aren't there any better books you can write about?



no ice

4 days ago

@mac check out the author's 2018 book "hollywood math and aftermath". one of the best recent books on cinema.



Mac

4 days ago

No thanks. Anyone who regards Heat as some kind of masterpiece has no credibility and I could care less what they think about anything else. Heat is masculine camp at its worst.



anthciancio

4 days ago

You seem to care quite a bit actually. But hey — art is subjective and that includes cinema and literature. If you cared to pay attention, though, Mann was a co-author and he had a lot of this backstory fleshed out decades ago. Oh and Heat is great and you're definitely not fun at parties (but both are just my opinion of course.)



J.D. Connor

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