

# Sympathy for the Devil

In the genre of politics, films can easily sensationalise courtroom and prison scenes for a cinematic climax, representing law and order as a performative spectacle where democracy always wins for theatrical appeal. But in James Foley's "The Chamber" (1996), sensationalism can't handle the truth and criminology is shown in its real colours. Gene Hackman stars as Sam Cayhall, a former Klu Klux Klan member on death row for the death of a Jewish family, who finds his prison sentence reduced when his grandson, a democratic attorney, fights for his freedom. What makes 'The Chamber' such a difficult watch is the film's realism towards hegemonic law and the abuse of power. Where in most instances, the lawyer-protagonist uses their heroism and egotistical confidence to reach their goal, Adam Hill, played by Chris O'Donnell, struggles to navigate through an immovable bureaucracy as his fight for democracy is represented by an exhausting journey through legislation and repetitive rejections from a failed system, suddenly wiping the plot of any movie-magic and sensationalism, which Nicole Rafter labels a critical advantage, "*Critical crime films shift the blame for crime from the individual to society or the criminal justice system itself. By doing so, they challenge the audience's comfortable assumptions about the nature of justice and the efficacy of punishment*" (RAFTER, Nicole Hahn. 2006. *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society. 2nd ed. New York; Oxford University Press*). Therefore, by focusing on the bureaucratic movement, Foley's "critical" direction truly questions the viewer's knowledge of crime in film. But by far the most controversial element of 'The Chamber' is how it separates Cayhall from his crimes, humanising him in an attempt to avoid shock and awe. Rather than framing Cayhall

as, what any civil society would call a white-supremacist, a monster, the plot explores the psychological theory of evil's birth. In other words, by witnessing Cayhall's racist crimes as a product of sociological hatred instead of his theatrical personality, 'The Chamber' subverts his initial villainous appearance and sympathises with how racism is a taught not born. This argument of anti-essentialism can also be seen in the law of opposites theory in tv studies, "*Even though the crime rate in Chicago was one of the lowest among American cities by the later years of the twentieth century, it is still generally perceived and referred to as a city of crime and violence – in other words, the stereotype, perpetuated by the media in films and books, persists*". (SURETTE, Ray and Heather ANDERSON. 2007. 'Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice: Images, Realities and Policies'. *Media international Australia incorporating Culture & policy*). This idea that the media's version of criminal activity is distorted from real statistics, therefore serving for entertainment purposes over social truth. In conclusion, sensationalism in criminological cinema often relies on the law of opposites to make a convict seem biologically different. Whether through social indifferences or freakily high intelligence, this wrongful representation can damage the truth in image, which ironically is the most important aspect of law. By exploring how 'The Chamber' uses anti-essentialism (the idea a criminal is made not born) and represents the honesty of legislation, I can agree with both Rafter and Surette's critiques on misinformed criminology, stereotypes and movie-magic for sensation.