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Urban Imaginaries in Canadian Crime Film: Entanglements of Crime and Place in *Running with the Hitman*

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Abstract

This paper examines Canadian crime film and urban imaginaries, taking as its focus the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, and its depiction in the film *Running with the Hitman*, released in 2004. Considering elements of genre, narrative structure, and visuality, the paper demonstrates how place serves to mark and map out boundaries between the criminal and non-criminal, and to locate crime in relation to specific urban geographies. The main argument in this paper is that representations of crime, criminality, and place in this film work together to co-produce a particular vision of the city and shape a notion of urbanity. In the case of *Running with the Hitman,* the film represents Winnipeg as an industrial, working-class city in transition. The urban imaginary that surfaces in this film is ambivalent; it is rooted in nostalgia for the 'old' neighbourhood and ambivalence about modern, (sub)urban life. It is also a contradictory version of urbanity in the context of contemporary Canadian film, encompassing conventional urban images as well as new vistas.

Introduction

This paper reflects on the ways in which images of crime and criminality in crime film are entangled with representations of place and co-construct particular notions of urbanity. More specifically, the paper examines Canadian crime film and urban imaginaries, focusing on the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, and its depiction in the film *Running with the Hitman*. Released in 2004, the film is a generic hybrid gangster-comedy crime film that focuses on two aging Jewish men (Gideon Schub, played by Judd Hirsch, and Nathan Winkler, played by Danny Aiello) who set out to murder Gideon's son-in-law. The film is shot on location in the city of Winnipeg, which is a relatively large, multicultural Canadian prairie city with a thriving film industry. Many films are filmed in Winnipeg masquerading as

other, mainly US, locations (such as Chicago or New York). However, in *Running with the Hitman*, the story is actually set in Winnipeg, which is specifically named and identified through the use of iconic landmarks and real locations that are recognizable to anyone familiar with the city. In order to explore the constitutive relationship between place, crime, and visuality, as it occurs in this film, the paper draws inspiration from interdisciplinary approaches to film and the city, incorporating cultural criminology methodology, as well as insights from cultural sociology, film studies, and urban studies perspectives on the cinematic city.

The first section of the paper will discuss relationships between film, crime, and the city, with a focus on Canadian cinematic representations of the urban. Next, it presents an analysis of the film *Running with the Hitman*, considering elements of genre, narrative structure, and the film's visuality. Not simply a backdrop to the crime story that unfolds, it will be argued that place is implicated in character and plot developments, and is central to representations of crime and criminality. Reinforced through visual strategies, place serves to mark and map out boundaries between the criminal and non-criminal, and to locate crime in relation to specific urban geographies. The analysis will illustrate how representations of crime, criminality, and place in this film work together to co-produce a vision of the city as an industrial, working-class city in transition. The urban imaginary that surfaces here is characterized by ambivalence; it is rooted in nostalgia for the city's working-class past and its hardscrabble, yet tight-knit "old neighbourhoods," and ambivalence about the city's transition to a postindustrial metropolis marked by middle-class, modern suburban life and gentrifying neighbourhoods. In the context of postmodern Canadian cinema and urban representation, Winnipeg's urbanity as conveyed by this film is moreover contradictory, since, on the one hand it reinforces conventional, national-realist ideas about the city as a place of social ills, while at the same time it illustrates the specificity of the city and diversity of urban life; the city is marked by crime and deviance, yet is simultaneously a place of possibility, plurality, and change.

Crime, Film, and the City

Cultural criminology has inspired an emerging scholarship on crime films, which are defined by Rafter (2006: 6) as "films that focus primarily on crime and its consequences." Cultural criminology comprises a growing scholarship and specific domain within criminology concerned with the culturally constituted meanings of crime and crime control. In particular, it draws attention to "*the importance of the image within criminology*," and advocates that criminologists be "familiar with the various ways in which crime and 'the story of crime' is imaged, constructed and 'framed' within modern society" (Hayward 2010: 9, italics in original). Studies in this vein approach crime films (and other forms of popular media) as significant cultural products that establish popular discourses of crime, or "popular criminology," and that "shape our thinking about crime" (Rafter 2007: 404). Of central concern are the ways in which crime films generate and sustain "collective, socially shared understandings of crime and deviance, justice and punishment" (Yar 2010: 68). Crime film research encompasses a wide range of topics, including certain categories of crime (i.e., Rafter 2007, on sex-crime films), the representation of criminal etiology in film (Rafter and Brown 2011), crime film sub-genres (Rafter 2006; García-Mainar 2013), constructions of justice in crime films (Welsh, Fleming, and Dowler 2011), the relationship of the spectator to images of crime on the screen (Young 2010), and how representations of crime in crime film are refracted through national cinemas and specific political, social, geographical, and historical contexts (Kohm, Bookman, and Greenhill 2017). Yet not much attention is paid to the ways in which cinematic images of crime are implicated in and co-generate particular notions of place. Notable exceptions include, for instance, Horton's (2017) work on the counter-rhetorical representation of Vancouver's stigmatized Downtown Eastside in the independent Canadian film *On the Corner* (2003), and Gacek and Kohm's (2016: 6) germane analysis of Winnipeg crime films that "engage the common place myth of Winnipeg as a frozen and wintery city." These studies emphasize how crime films not only provide us with

representations of crime and criminality but also of the places criminals inhabit and in which crimes and criminal activity occur. Of particular interest here is the place of the city in crime film, and the ways in which crime films invoke an urban imaginary.

There is an extensive history of urban imaging in film (Hallam 2010; also see Shiel 2001). Cinema, as Shiel (2001: 1) points out, has long had the ability to "capture and express the spatial complexity, diversity, and social dynamism of the city" through the use of various cinematic conventions such as cinematography and lighting. In the case of Liverpool, for example, the "first known moving images" were recorded in 1897 for the Lumière Company, who displayed the films at a theatre in London as "spectacles of attraction" (Hallam 2010: 286). Since then, a proliferation of filmic representations of the city have played an important role in mythologizing the metropolis and establishing urban imaginaries, shaping the way audiences perceive, experience, and relate to urban environments. This is as much the case for "the archetypal 'cinematic cities' of Berlin, New York, Los Angeles and London" (Hallam 2010: 281) as it is for Canadian cities, including provincial cities such as Edmonton or Winnipeg. Cinematic images of the city construct place-myths — the stories (including ideas, experiences, affects) that are circulated about, and become associated to place — by which urban areas or cities as a whole are defined as creative, romantic, risky, or dangerous. For example, cities like Salford, in Greater Manchester were represented as bleak, industrial, working-class cities in the 'kitchen sink' films of the 1950s and 1960s (such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, directed by Karel Reisz [1960] and *A Taste of Honey*, directed by Tony Richardson [1961]). These films reflected a shift from filming in the studios of London to 'realist' cinema that would capture the gritty, everyday experiences of living in the north of England (Milestone 2008). A more recent example can be seen in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* (2011), which draws on and reinforces the widespread mythology of Paris as a 'city of love,' with romantic, touristic images of the city's art museums, quaint cafés, and antique shops, interwoven with nostalgia for the city's bohemian

past via scenes of time travel, and a narrative that ends with the main protagonist (played by Owen Wilson) finding love on the city's cobblestone streets. In this way, films, along with other forms of popular media including television, advertising, magazines, and social media platforms such as Instagram, are involved in processes of "social spatialization," a term that was developed by Shields (1991: 31) "to designate the ongoing social construction of the spatial at the level of the social imaginary (collective mythologies, presuppositions) as well as interventions in the landscape (for example the built environment)." In other words, cultural media such as film play a significant role in the meaningful construction of place. Still, as Balshaw and Kennedy (2000: 3) write, "[T]he city is inseparable from its representations, but it is neither identical with nor reducible to them…." Cinematic representations of the city only comprise one element of a complex of material and representational forces through which cities are shaped, reshaped, and surface in everyday life.

There is a substantial scholarship on the relationship between film and the city from disciplines as diverse as urban geography (Davis 2001), film studies (Brundson 2007; Trifonova 2013; Melnyk 2014), communications and cultural studies (McCarthy 1999; Lindner 2009; Hallam 2010), and sociology (Shiel 2001; Milestone 2008), reflecting "a multitude of urban 'cinematics'" (Penz and Lu 2011: 9). Yet, while some studies incorporate films that can be categorized as crime films in their analysis of urban representation, there is not much engagement with the cultural criminological lens or sustained work on crime film and the city. Crime films offer specific representations of cities, featuring places where criminality is cultivated, criminal activity occurs (including the spectacular, liminal, and marginalized spaces of the city), policing is enacted, and forms of justice unfold. In order to conduct such analysis in relation to a Canadian crime film, however, it is first necessary to consider how the urban has been depicted more generally in Canadian cinema.

Canadian Cities on the Silver Screen

In his groundbreaking book, *Film and the City* (2014), Canadian film scholar Melnyk indicates that historically, Canadian cinema, especially the documentary tradition promoted by the National Film Board of Canada, has privileged natural landscapes instead of urban environments as a way to visualize Canadian identity (also see Melnyk 2007/2008). This orientation toward place has been a key element of "nationalist-realist cinema" (Melnyk 2014: 6). Focusing on the Canadian wilderness, the Maritimes, and the mountains at Banff, films in this vein have cultivated a rural myth of Canadian identity, whereby Canadians are united through an identification with the land. Melnyk notes how this limited notion of Canadianness is not only Eurocentric, but also neglects the urban element of Canadian life. In contrast to the rural and its connotations of "wholesomeness" (Melnyk 2014: 11), the urban in the nationalist-realist paradigm has been portrayed "as a conflicted expression of welcome economic power, on the one hand, and social ills, on the other" (Melnyk 2014: 7). Such images, Melnyk (2014: 12) argues, construct an "'urban myth,' the fiction of urban uniformity" in relation to Canadian cities, in which cities are associated with criminality, disorder, and deviance, and are more or less the same.

Melnyk (2014: 8) traces how an urban outlook that "eschews the land in favour of cultural and industrial production, techno-realties, and ethnic and class identities" emerged in Canadian cinema in the postmodern era of filmmaking. The term postmodern is used by Melnyk to refer to a particular period of time, in which a postmodern sensibility emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as a style of filmmaking that places emphasis on diversity and plurality, for example, in representations of Canadian life. While films in this vein appeared as early as the 1960s, he notes that "[I]t was only with the founding of Telefilm Canada in 1982 that a new era really began" and a "new standard of urban representation was established" (Melnyk 2014: 13). This new era of film has "adopted an *urban imaginary* perspective," a term that Melnyk (2014: 8) develops to "refer to the pivotal position of urban spaces and urban characters

in postmodern Canadian feature films and to the way in which Canadian filmmakers have imagined Canadian cities and the people who live and work there." Such films challenge modernist, nationalist-realist notions of national identity through an emphasis on the variety of Canadian experience, perspectives, and imagery. Instead of reproducing a homogenous view of the city, postmodern films provide audiences with a specific renderings which are often, as Melnyk (2014: 9) points out, "refracted through the filmmaker's experience." While idiosyncratic, such depictions of the urban still convey meanings about place that resonate with others and co-construct notions of urban identity. As Milestone (2008: 1169) suggests, "[R]epresentations of place can never really claim to represent everyone's city; they can however provide us with some clues about how to navigate and respond to particular places."

Canadian crime film is an especially significant genre to examine in terms of the urban imaginary due to its potentially conflicting representations: on the one hand, crime films tend to reinforce conventional, uniform notions of the city as site of social ills through an emphasis on the 'deviant' elements of metropolitan life; yet, postmodern Canadian crime film also draws attention to the cinematic city's specificity. Such ambivalence is certainly present in the film *Running with the Hitman*, in which place features prominently in its portrayal of crime.

A Note on Methodology

The analysis is informed by a methodological approach in cultural criminology developed by Yar (2010: 77), which he describes as a "'synthetic' approach that mediates between ideology critique and postmodern sensibilities." This approach emphasizes the meanings generated within crime films, and recognizes the role that they play in constituting a popular criminology that is "bound-up with institutional practices and political relations" (Yar 2010: 77). At the same time, it acknowledges that crime films both draw from, but also shape, cultural meaning in novel and unexpected ways. Moreover, the

meanings a film proffers are understood as potentially multiple, contradictory, and ambiguous since they "refract the wider tensions and divisions with the society that they represent" (Yar 2010: 77). Overall, Yar's synthetic model allows for a nuanced film analysis, drawing attention to the "complexity of cultural meanings inherent in crime films" (2010: 79).

Guided by this methodological approach, qualitative methods of narrative and visual analysis were employed in order to unpack the various, interconnected meanings of place, crime, and criminality in *Running with the Hitman*. Examining the complexity of meaning, emphasis was placed on the contradictory, ambivalent nature of the place-myths conveyed in this postmodern crime film. Particular attention was paid to aspects of genre and narrative structure, including the use of binary oppositions to create tension and move the plot forward, as well as elements of cinematography, such as the types of shots used to enhance or establish meaning. Insights from cultural sociology, film studies, and urban studies are drawn on to elaborate the ways in which meanings conveyed about crime, criminality, and place are bound up with aspects of class, urban geography, and Canadian cinema.

The film that is analyzed in this paper can be classified as a Canadian crime film. Although the film is directed by an American female director, Melanie Mayron, and features Hollywood actors, much of the crew, including the cinematographer and art director — key positions which influence the visuality of a film — are Canadian (the cinematographer, Luc Montpellier, previously worked with the well-known Winnipeg film director Guy Maddin on his 2003 film *The Saddest Music in the World*). The film was shot on location in the city of Winnipeg, and was made with Telefilm funding in part for CTV (a Canadian broadcast television network) where it was also broadcast to a Canadian audience. While it is difficult to quantify the precise number of viewers who have watched the film, the original broadcaster, CTV, describes itself as "Canada's most-watched television network for the past 13 years in a row," suggesting its

ability to reach a broad audience (Bell Media 2017). Indeed, it is important to keep in mind the significance of audience in co-creating the meanings presented by cinematic urban imaginaries (see Hall 2006). In the case of Canadian film, the impact of such images may be curbed, as Melnyk (2014: 26) notes, "[B]ecause of the limited audience in Canada for its own narrative cinema, the chances of the urban imaginary becoming a dominant cultural discourse are probably slim." Furthermore, audiences may offer different interpretations of such films, based on their various social, geographic, and cultural locations — a range of interpretations that cannot be fully captured in this paper, which offers a particular, scholarly reading.

In addition to meeting the criteria of classification as a Canadian crime film, there are a number of reasons why *Running with the Hitman* was chosen to explore the urban imaginary in crime film. There is a strong emphasis on Winnipeg imagery in this film, which features many iconic sites and familiar neighbourhoods. Unlike Winnipeg crime films that feature cold, snowy imagery to construct a notion of the city as a frozen place where justice is "put on ice," as it were (see Gacek and Kohm 2016), *Running with the Hitman* is instead set in the summer, which allows the film to draw attention to other kinds of qualities associated to the metropolis. The lack of snowy scenes further marks a break with themes cultivated through nationalist-realist tradition, which underscore the natural landscape and its governance by seasonal change in depictions of place (see Melnyk 2014). The film also addresses important urban phenomena that continue to shape city life and urban identity, and which are experienced by other cities as well, including processes of deindustrialization, decentralization, and the city becoming postindustrial. Thus, while *Running with the Hitman* underscores the specificity of the city, it alludes to larger trends manifest in the development of common spaces marked by widely shared symbols, such as the suburbs.

Setting the Scene in *Running with the Hitman*

The narrative in *Running with the Hitman* is structured around two main characters, Nathan and Gideon, who both grew up in the same multi-ethnic inner city neighbourhood, yet followed very different trajectories in life. Gideon has lived a life of crime and is a long-standing member of the local Italian crime mob, while Nathan became a prominent businessman who lives in the suburbs with his family. The story unfolds through a series of flashbacks, which introduce the main characters.

The opening scenes cast Nathan as the main storyteller and dominant voice. As part of his community service, Nathan is required to give a talk to young male offenders about his life of crime, and to get their attention he focuses on the story of his last attempted 'hit.' The story of Nathan begins with an establishing shot of a century-old school with the description, "Winnipeg, 1947." Mercado (2011: 77) explains that, "[T]he establishing shot is usually an exterior, *long shot* or *extreme long shot* that showcases a location where the action that follows will take place" (emphasis in original). These shots help to convey information about the social position and lifestyle of the key characters in the film, setting the scene for the main plot. In this case, Nathan is located via his childhood school in the city of Winnipeg. We find out that Nathan was orphaned, bullied, and eventually learned to fight back, leading him to a life of crime in the employ of a local Italian mob (led by the Valente family). In and out of prison, he remained loyal to the mob only to be demoted near retirement age. Scenes featuring Nathan's criminal past take place in Winnipeg's downtown area, on Main Street in the city's infamous North End, as well as the dark alleyways, parking lots, and abandoned warehouse buildings of the Exchange District. His current lifestyle is conveyed with an establishing shot of a painted brick building, with a large vintage Pepsi ad, where Nathan works out on a balcony, suggesting that he is still located in, and is even attached to, the aging inner city.

An analysis of genre provides further insight into these opening scenes, which clearly conform to the gangster film genre. Agacinski

(2011: 20) describes genre as something that develops out of a dialogue between cultural producers who draw on, repeat, and extend "a network of conventions" in film, and cultural consumers who identify, acknowledge, and validate such conventions as part of a genre. The conventions of a genre can include elements such as plot, props, title, as well as setting, and expectations about space and the relationship of key characters to place. Gangster movies tend to set the viewer in the space of the city as the frame for action. The opening sequences are significant in establishing the meaning of space, since they "not only tell us where the story will take place, but also show immediately how the characters fit into this space" (Agacinski 2011: 24). Following genre conventions, the opening sequences of *Running with the Hitman* locate Nathan on the 'mean streets' of Winnipeg, which works to define Nathan as a criminal whose fate is shaped by the tough environment he inhabits.

At the same time, the film is a generic hybrid, with elements of comedy, and can be defined as a crime comedy film. Crime comedies are relatively underexplored in work on crime film, yet, as Leitch (2002: 267) points out, they rely on the conventions of crime films, and deal with "the same thematic contradictions" as more serious crime films, but instead of perturbation they provoke laughter. This does not mean that comedy crime films should not be taken seriously, however, since they still convey important meanings about criminals, crime, and crime control, and constitute a popular criminology. In *Running with the Hitman*, the comedic dimension becomes obvious when Gideon is introduced as Nathan's accomplice, in an establishing shot that places him squarely in front of his spacious and modern suburban home. It is the juxtaposition between this image (of a successful suburbanite) and the conventional expectations surrounding criminality that elicits a comedic effect. Flashback sequences illustrate that Gideon, who achieved success as the "Office King" — the owner of an office supply business by that name — is recently retired and slightly bored in the suburbs, where his life is now devoted to his grandson, David. Further flashback sequences

show that Gideon is deeply troubled by his son-in-law, Jeff, an unemployed, narcissistic, womanizer whose aim in life is to get on a TV game show. After Gideon feeds his grandson halva, a traditional Jewish food, Jeff obtains a restraining order against him, which pushes Gideon to a breaking point. Jeff, who has a strong peanut allergy, wrongfully assumes that halva is made with peanuts, which could potentially harm David. Gideon's rash decision to hire a hitman to murder Jeff is comic here, since it undermines his lifelong project of making all the right choices to become an upstanding citizen and respectable businessman.

Gideon's ability to 'escape' the city suggests that it is not only environmental factors at play in the cultivation of criminal behaviour, otherwise Gideon too would have lived a life of crime (see Rafter 2006). His success, however, relates to the social and economic supports Gideon received at home, including the opportunity to take over the family business. This highlights the significance of one's access to — and varying levels of — social, economic, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) in shaping the kinds of opportunities afforded to individuals living in such 'tough' neighbourhoods. In other words, criminality here is presented as a matter of complex environmental, social, cultural, and economic structural factors that intersect in specific ways to shape individual trajectories.

What carries the plot forward in this film is the partnership formed between Gideon and Nathan, who conspire to carry out a hit on the son-in-law. Nostalgic for their youth, the duo's comedic attempts to commit murder ultimately prove that they are still tough despite growing old. Neither man is portrayed as a likely killer. Nathan has never murdered anyone, yet he (reluctantly) aspires to kill in order to prove his worth (as an ethnic outsider) to the mob. Gideon's urge to kill is comically tied to an exaggerated sense of exasperation with Jeff. Gideon and Nathan are entangled as they bond over childhood memories, experiences of aging, and shared interests in Jewish culture and food, yet they remain unlikely partners in crime. Indeed, the pairing of Nathan and Gideon underscores their differences,

which are reflected in a series of binary oppositions — cultural classifications that divide the world into "sets of dualistic opposing categories" (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2012: 282).

Entanglements of Crime and Place: Binary Oppositions and Boundary-Making

Running with the Hitman is structured in part through a basic binary opposition between "the criminal," on the one hand, and "the good citizen," on the other, which are used to organize value conflicts in crime film (Rafter 2006: 201). As Rafter (2006: 202) notes, this oppositional value structure is important for viewers, since it enables moviegoers to explore, experiment, and identify with, however imaginatively and ephemerally, the qualities associated with both the criminal and the good citizen: "[W]e can savour the dangers of the streets *and* the safety of the home, the excitement of violence *and* the pleasures of peace." In many ways, Rafter (2006: 202) explains, crime films "enact struggles that divide us as individuals and as a society." Yet, crime films also provide resolution through a "dialectical synthesis" whereby one side triumphs over the other or there is some blending of the two as they come to terms with each other throughout the film (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2012).

In the case of *Running with the Hitman*, the opposition between criminal and good citizen is represented in the division between Gideon and Nathan, which is emphasized through the film's visuality. According to Melnyk (2014: 14), "[V]isuality refers to the manner in which a film conveys meaning and emotion through its framing of specific visual images, which takes place within the broader space established in the film." The division between Gideon and Nathan is particularly symbolized in several scenes where the two meet up at a parking lot in front of the iconic Nutty Club building — a turn-of-the-century brick building known for its large, painted Nutty Club candy ad, and which served as a manufacturing hub from the early 1900s until recently (Winnipeg Free Press 2007). In each of these scenes, the pair is depicted in the foreground on either side of a

parking barrier. Visually, this is a "two shot" image that establishes their partnership and equal weighting in the story. It is also an "emblematic shot," which is understood as having "the power to communicate abstract, complex, and associative ideas with compositions that reveal special connections between visual elements in the frame" (Mercado 2011: 77). Here, the two men are together, bound by their common Jewish heritage, urban nostalgia, and criminal intent, but they remain divided — the physical barrier symbolizes the schism between their criminal (and non-criminal) lifestyles and socio-spatial worlds.

Still, the opposition between criminal and non-criminal is significantly blurred in the pairing of Nathan and Gideon, who also share certain values based on their shared background and age, including an ethic of hard work and the importance of community. These shared values underpin the pair's common dislike of Gideon's son-in-law, who embodies contrasting qualities such as laziness and individualism. Further, Gideon himself embodies the conflict between criminal aspirations and upstanding citizenship, which comprises a source of humour in the film, while Nathan battles his own contradictory desire to prove himself as a real killer and his moral hesitation to take his criminal career that far.

The binary opposition between "the criminal" and "the good citizen" in this film is extended through an emphasis on place. There is a pronounced urban/suburban divide in the film, whereby Nathan is located in and associated with the city, while Gideon maintains (somewhat reluctantly) a suburban lifestyle. Indeed, the city is where the men meet to scheme, spy, and plot their hit. Their initial meeting is held in a greasy spoon diner called Shanghai Schwartz in the multi-ethnic neighbourhood where they both grew up. Exterior shots of the small, nondescript restaurant, set close to the street, and the rumbling of low-flying planes overhead suggest the urban and working-class character of the area. Although the neighbourhood is not specifically named in the film, it is identifiable to anyone familiar with the city as the North End. This great mythic place is variously perceived as

"landscape of despair," a "place of heroic working-class struggle," and a "paragon of multicultural co-existence" (Hiebert 1992: 92). Historically, from the early 1900s, the North End was home to marginalized migrant groups, including predominant Ukranian, Jewish, and Polish communities. However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the area has changed with an influx of Indigenous peoples, and new waves of immigrants from Asia and Latin America, while the Jewish community has all but moved out. The North End remains a low-income neighbourhood in the city, characterized by lower property values and various struggles; however, it is also marked by a strong sense of community, cultural diversity, and collective activity.

The city is also where Gideon, in disguise, tracks the daily movements of his son-in-law, who spends part of his day checking on the progress of his loft conversion. In these scenes, the viewer encounters establishment shots of the heritage building where the loft is located, as well as an upscale café where Jeff gets his daily coffee. Although Gideon continues to make murder plans in a notebook in his office at his suburban home – while comically trying to hide such work from his wife – the suburbs are depicted as mainly a safe, secure environment where Gideon retreats and engages in family life. Indeed, Gideon is often depicted at his home with family, meeting his lawyer, and in his office, where he is ready to respond to calls about his former business. These scenes emphasize the well-kept landscapes, the leisurely pool and pond, and the quiet, peaceful ambiance, in juxtaposition to the busy, concrete cityscape.

Crime and place are deeply entangled in this crime film. Criminal action is set in specific urban geographies — notably the city (rather than the suburbs) — investing the city with cultural meanings through which it is mythologized as a criminogenic environment. Place, in turn, is used to mark criminality and establish boundaries between "the criminal" and "the good citizen," structuring a "normative landscape — the way in which ideas about what is right, just, and appropriate are transmitted through space and place"

(Cresswell 1996: 8). Indeed, places and their meanings shape notions about, and ascribe values to, the individuals who inhabit them and the activities that occur within their bounds. They sort out who and what belongs where through a process of "geographical ordering," which is described by Cresswell (1996: 153) as a relational process that differentiates between "us" and "them." Places maintain such differences through the operation of boundaries (both physical and symbolic) that draw lines between people or activities that are in or out of place.

While Gideon 'crosses over' to the other side — to 'run with the hitman' as it were — this does not necessarily erode binary oppositions and differences. Rather, it draws attention to and reaffirms boundaries of place, class, and criminality. Unlike Nathan, who is mainly confined to the city, Gideon is depicted as having the agency to move between city and suburbs. Gideon has the requisite social, cultural, and economic capital to appreciate and participate in the city's establishments *and* to inhabit the suburban sphere. Yet, Gideon is shown to be 'out of place' in Nathan's criminal, working-class world. This is reflected in three key moments: first, his comic failure to carry out the crime; second, the scene in which he is sentenced to one year of house arrest because of his age and upstanding role in the community (even though he is turned in by his wife and found guilty of attempted murder); and finally, his move back to a middle-class suburban life. Near the end of the film, after his sentencing, Gideon is portrayed outside a restaurant with his well-dressed family (without Jeff), who happily embrace as they stroll down a trendy street lit with twinkle lights.

Nathan, on the other hand, receives a sentence that extends his community service. His life continues as before, yet with the self-realization that he has failed in his criminal career. In a scene where we see Gideon burying the gun he took out for his last hit, he laments, "[P]eople fail at their dreams all the time and have to live with it…I wanted to be a killer…It's something I'm not, and I have to live with it." He explains his failure toward the end of the film,

declaring to the group of offenders, "I made one stupid choice when I was a kid, thinking I had to play it tough to make it in this world…And then, I spent my whole life paying for it." The ideology that this ending conveys reflects the conventional notion that crime does not pay. Of particular significance, Nathan remains in the city. While he ventures out to the suburbs briefly to meet up with Gideon in one scene, he is ultimately confined to the very criminogenic environment that made him in the first place. As Agacinski (2011: 26) notes, in gangster films, "the gangster deals with a frontier, or rather here with a border, but this one cannot be crossed or moved. It is the border of the finite possibilities that are offered to the man in the modern city: either stay in the shadow or lose oneself trying to get out." The city in this sense serves as a kind of prison — a carceral space — where criminals are contained.

Winnipeg: A (Post)Industrial City in Transition?

Melnyk (2014: 23) suggests that postmodern Canadian cinema, which highlights the differences between cities identified by name or distinctive features, invokes a kind of urbanity — a term that refers to "the overall impression of a city that filmmakers create in the course of their narrative representation." He elaborates: "[A] film's urbanity consists in the way that the story, the characters, and the cinematic techniques used by the filmmaker combine to create a singular sense of the city in which the film is set" (Melnyk 2014: 23). *Running with the Hitman* conveys a rather ambivalent urban imaginary associated with the city of Winnipeg through the film's narrative, characters, and visuality. On one hand, the film cultivates an image of Winnipeg as an aging, industrial working-class city characterized by crime and deviance. Yet, on the other hand, Winnipeg is depicted as a place of possibility and change — where old industrial spaces are being transformed through processes of urban renewal, marked by ambivalence about modern (sub)urban life. The overall impression of the city in this film is singular in the sense that it draws from the city's specific neighbourhoods, architecture, and culture, yet it reflects broader patterns of urban transformation and their

manifestation in particular spaces or practices that carry generic codes that broader audiences can relate to.

Indeed, much of the story unfolds in places associated with the city's industrial heritage and working-class life, including generic places such as the warehouse, the railway, and the urban street, as well as prominent, iconic locations including the Nutty Club factory, North Main, the Exchange District, the Neon Factory store, and the St. Charles Hotel. Moreover, many of these places reflect the city's history of immigration and the various ethnic working-class communities that have made the city home. This is strongly symbolized by the restaurant Shanghai Schwartz — a mash-up of Chinese restaurant and authentic Jewish deli, where a lone Israeli flag hangs on the wall between a plethora of Chinese paraphernalia. The emphasis on cultural diversity in the film's depiction of Winnipeg's industrial urbanism relates to Melnyk's (2014) observation that postmodern Canadian cinema encompasses a wide range of urban experience, identities, and imagery.

Many of the film's key locations are found in the city's Exchange District — a central neighbourhood established at the turn of the twentieth century as a hub of commerce, communications (newspapers), and trade. Visuals emphasize the 'authentic' aesthetic of the area's many still in-tact buildings with original architectural features, narrow cobblestone alleyways, and street-front shops in multiple scenes of criminal activity. In an analysis of British crime film and its touristic gaze, Sydney-Smith (2006: 90) notes how an emphasis on "real" places, or "authenticity" in this genre, is "crucially connected to nostalgia." Indeed, we can see how *Running with the Hitman* evokes a sense of nostalgia for Winnipeg's industrial past through the use of real locations such as the Nutty Club building, but also through historical flashback sequences featuring sepia-tinted shots of Nathan's boyhood school, close-ups of Nathan's vintage green car, as well as the dialogue between the main characters, who often reminisce about the urban, North End neighbourhood and culture of their youth. Overall, these images cultivate an identity for

the city as industrial and working class, encompassing values of multiculturalism, community, and productivity. At the same time, however, it is a tough environment comprised of 'mean streets' where criminals are made, and where crime and deviance thrive.

Still, the city and its urbanity are not fixed. In many ways this is a film about transition and change. The main characters are facing the transition to retirement or semi-retirement as they age. The city too is depicted as a place undergoing a transformation. For example, in one scene Nathan and Gideon mention the changes they witnessed in their old neighbourhood, noting that the store where they bought halva growing up had converted several times. Nathan states: "It was Pearlman's, then the bakery, and then Schub's Office Supply, which later became…Office King." Indeed, alongside the factories, warehouses, and greasy spoon diners, the film's audiences encounter images of urban redevelopment in the city. These include interior and exterior shots of a loft conversion, wherein the historic exterior and old-school elevator of a heritage building are juxtaposed with the sleek, modern interior-in-progress. The loft is being renovated for Gideon's daughter and son-in-law, who embrace the new urban lifestyle captured in Zukin's (1982) notion of "loft-living." This refers to a middle-class lifestyle associated with gentrified residential spaces and consumption practices, based on a preference for living in urban environments. Here, we see a glimpse of a postindustrial future against a backdrop of an industrial, working-class past.

Urban renewal, depicted in these scenes and invoked through the common symbols of café bars and loft conversions, for example, invokes a sense of optimism — of the possibility of (re)constructing a different kind of city, where the tough environments Nathan encountered as a child are reworked. Yet, renewal is not without risk. As reflected in Jeff's character, there is the risk that the city will become superficial, image obsessed, and individualistic. For Gideon and Nathan, urban transformation further results in loss of community. Indeed, along with such redevelopment, there is a real risk of displacement for artists and arts communities, as well as low-

income individuals who inhabit the area. Still, the film presents the hope that urban regeneration will enable an escape from the city from within. This is the same message of hope that Nathan conveys to his young audience: it is possible to choose a different, non-criminal future and to generate change from within.

In many ways, the glimpse of a rejuvenated city reflects Winnipeg's contemporary reality, whereby working-class and industrial spaces revalorized as 'authentic' are now fuelling commercial investment, redevelopment, and change.[1] Arguably, film — both in terms of its content as well as the activity associated with film production — plays a role in facilitating such redevelopment, since it makes places culturally interesting, both on and off the screen. As Milestone (2008: 1173) notes, "[T]he value that these types of spaces and industries have go far beyond the economic — they have an intense symbolic impact on the identity of a city." Indeed, several film companies and organizations, such as the Winnipeg Film Group, are located in the Exchange District, and the area has seen the development of film-based walking tours and various film festivals, as its identity is increasingly shaped through film. At the same time, crime films circumvent the 'creative city' narrative and entrepreneurial efforts to rebrand the city as a middle-class space of culture and consumption. In the case of *Running with the Hitman*, such urban visions are destabilized by an urban imaginary that does not hide, but instead highlights, the city's industrial character, working-class sensibility, and liminal spaces — such as the many empty parking lots — where criminals meet and plans for murder are made. Indeed, crime films

[1] Processes of decentralization and de-industrialization contributed to the decline of the Exchange District by the 1970s, when artists and arts groups began to move into the area, spurring a slow artist-led process of revitalization (see Bookman 2014; Zukin 1995). When the film was shot in the early 2000s, Winnipeg's Exchange District was still in a process of gradual redevelopment. However, more recently, the area has reached a "tipping point" and is well on its way to becoming a fully fledged gentrified neighbourhood and creative district (see Bookman 2014). During this period, the area has experienced significant change, evident in the redeveloped central Old Market Square park, which features an avant-garde stage for festival events, large-scale and ongoing condo conversions, the cultivation of a boutique retail environment and artisanal restaurants, as well as a clustering of creative businesses and professionals (Kirbyson 2000; McNeill 2008).

may have a largely ambivalent relationship with the city — both in terms of the urban imaginaries they construct, and the ways in which they shape urban environments through film practices and representations.

Conclusion: Canadian Crime Film and Ambivalent Urban Imaginaries

Crime fiction scholar Hausladen (2000) makes a distinction between "place-based plot and place as backdrop" whereby place-based plots involve place as an essential part of the story and the criminal activity that occurs (in Newton 2011: 22). In *Running with the Hitman*, place is essential not only in the sense of where crimes happen, but in that it actively constructs and permeates characters, notions of criminality, and narrative elements, such as the binary oppositions which fuel tensions, comedy, and invoke interest on the part of audiences.

Overall, entanglements of crime, place, and class in this film construct an image of the city of Winnipeg as a city that is divided between an industrial, 'authentic' working-class past and a postindustrial, potentially 'superficial' middle-class present and future. There is a sense of loss of 'real' community, culture, and urban life conveyed through a nostalgia for the city's industrial past and its close-knit, though hardscrabble, working-class neighbourhoods. Yet, at the same time, Winnipeg is represented as a city that is being reconfigured from the inside out, just as the main characters in the film (who are retired, elderly men) realize personal development and growth. It is a city that is rooted in nostalgia, yet it is in flux; it is ambivalent about its postindustrial future and modern (sub)urban life.

Moreover, this urban imaginary is reflective of both residual and emerging approaches to the city as cultivated in Canadian cinema. On the one hand, *Running with the Hitman* places emphasis on the city's specificity by incorporating 'authentic' locations and histories of immigration in its narrative and visuality. On the other hand, the city

(while in transition) remains, in stereotypical fashion, a criminogenic environment that produces, circulates, and contains crime and criminals. Conveyed as a space of social ills, the urban imaginary in this film reproduces aspects of national-realist Canadian cinema and the urban myth of metropolitan uniformity.

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