

## Response Sheet #2

**Title:** Collateral

**Director:** Michael Mann

**Date Composed:** 2004

### **Setting: Place and time**

The film is set in Los Angeles on the 24-25<sup>th</sup> January, 2004. The majority of the action takes place within a twenty minute cab ride of downtown Los Angeles.

The taxi cab provides the base on which the rest of the plot unfolds. It becomes the getaway vehicle, storage facility and base from which every action is launched.

The murders themselves occur at 1039 South Union Street, 7565 Fountain Street, the Jazz club and the nightclub '*Fever*'.

Overall, the setting on tall buildings and a corporate sunset gives a feel for the power and presence of big money and the cartel Vincent is serving.

### **Context & Values: Cultural and societal influences**

The text is set in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in an age when terrorism is feared. The film is set just two and a half years after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks on the world trade centres. It is this attitude towards terrorism that makes the authorities very quick to act, sometimes without proper judgement. In this film, as soon as it appears that another witness, Peter Lim, will be taken out, the "Feds" act quickly to take out who they believe is Vincent. Their judgement turns out to be wrong as they try to take out Max, believing him to be the assassin.

Another value expressed in the text as a result of the context of the time is the dislike expressed for the FBI by the local law enforcement. It is becoming a common trend in modern society for the federal agencies to take over a case that they regard as of 'National Importance.' This attitude has created feelings of dislike by the local police towards the "Feds." Richard Weidner, who represents LAPD, shows his ill feelings by saying that the "Feds" will take "all our evidence, build their own case and take all the credit." Despite this, detective Ray Fanning goes against the FBI's judgement and helps to save Max's life, at the expense of his own.

In a society where everyone is in a hurry, taxi driver's are generally regarded as those who are otherwise unemployable and there only to serve more successful people. Max is an exception to this stereotype as he has plans for the future.

However, the society is divided into very distinct social levels, where taxi drivers are right near the bottom.

Max represents an individual who is seduced by the lure of materialism as he dreams of owning a fleet of limousines.

The fast pace of modern society also contributes to Vincent's life motto of living on impulse and improvising. This is another attitude common to the society of the time, however once again, this is a trait Max does not possess at the beginning of the film.

The film also focuses on the presence of capitalism in the commercial world and also looks at the attitudes of the drug cartel Vincent represents.

### **Form, Purpose and Audience:**

The text is in the form of a feature film produced for a contemporary, modern audience. Its intended audience consists of members of society who enjoy the thriller genre of movies or for those who enjoy refinement crime fiction texts.

The film was released in cinemas in early 2004 for the cinema-going public and then released later in the year on DVD for those who prefer home entertainment.

It also acts as a vehicle for Mann to criticise the American fascination with materialism and greed.

### **Mystery:**

The mystery in this text is spread out and not definite. The initial mystery to the responder is the identity of the character played by Tom Cruise, who turns out to be Vincent. He is a perplexing character who hides behind his glasses and the audience is left wondering who he is and what part he will play.

The next mystery that unfolds is what Vincent is doing at each of his stops. He disappears inside while Max waits in the cab. This mystery is resolved when Vincent's first murder of the evening lands on the roof of Max's cab.

Another mystery is of who Vincent has been hired by. Once we learn that Vincent is a contract killer, the audience is anxious to find out why he has been hired and by whom?

The next mystery and also the most difficult to piece together is the question of how the murders are connected. Why is Vincent stopping at the addresses he is and what do the victims have in common?

These mysteries are unwrapped one by one in a delayed denouement.

### **Conventions:**

As the text is in the refinement stage, the vast majority of conventions of classic crime fiction have been altered. However, there are a few conventions that hold true.

In the text, crimes are committed by a criminal and eventually solved by a sleuth.

Denouement is present throughout the text as the two sleuths, not connected in any way, Max & Fanning, observe and notice pieces of evidence that help to unravel the crime. Fanning is the one who notices the connections between the first two murders; he is also the one who realises Max's innocence despite the FBI not realising so. The text does contain a detective and a string of clues that allow the official detective, Fanning, and the impromptu sleuth Max, to solve the crime and save the day.

Another convention of the crime fiction genre that is evident in the text is the convention that involves the sleuth placed in danger. The official detective, Ray Fanning, is certainly placed in danger and is killed as a result. Max is also placed in danger; he is aimed at by FBI agents, trapped in the midst of a shootout at *Fever*, is involved in a car crash and is hunted by Vincent.

The final convention is that the sleuth will ultimately outsmart the bad guy and solve the crime. Whilst the official detective, Ray Fanning, is unable to stop Vincent, the film's impromptu sleuth, Max, manages to outsmart Vincent and kill him. For all Vincent's talk about impulsiveness, it is Max's impulsive move to step out into the aisle that ultimately tricks Vincent and brings him down.

Another main convention is the setting. The crimes are set in the foggy Los Angeles streets, which also helps to convey the feeling of mystery. They also give off a commercial, materialistic aura that backs up the values in the text.

### **Sleuths: Appearance, location, methods, traits, flaws**

There are two sleuths present in *Collateral*. The first of these is the official LAPD detective Ray Fanning. Fanning is a senior detective for the Los Angeles Police Department and is a cop who represents all that is good in law enforcement. He thinks situations through, examines all the evidence, re-creates scenarios and most importantly, cares for the citizens he serves. He is very observant, recognises connections and thinks ahead. He wears a dark overcoat, silver bangle, necklace, earring and expensive watch. His hair is always meticulously kept, slicked back and has a neat moustache. He is also rather sarcastic as is evident when he describes the first victim as "depressed so he jumps four stories out of a window onto his head. 'Wow, that feels better.' Picks himself up. 'Now I think I'll go on with the rest of my day.'"

When Fanning is pondering over a crime he paces with his hand on his chin.

The second of the sleuths present in *Collateral* is thrust into the role rather reluctantly. Max is a cab driver with simple clothes, he dresses in a plain brown coat and wears "coke bottle" glasses. He has been driving cabs for twelve years and doesn't like impulsive situations.

However, when Vincent hijacks his cab, Max is forced into becoming his chauffeur. The first time we see some of Max's skills is when he has to pretend to be Vincent and regain the list from Felix. He shows his versatility and gains back the list.

There are also glimpses of Max being a very observant person. He picks Annie as a lawyer and when she asks whether he's psychic, Max replies "little bit. There's the dark pin-stripe suit, elegant, not too flashy, that rules out advertising, plus a top-drawer briefcase that you live out of. And the purse. A Bottega. Anyway, a man gets in my cab with a sword, I figure he's a sushi chef. You: Clarence Darrow."

As the film progresses, we see more and more of Max thinking ahead in an attempt to save himself and then Annie from Vincent's clutches.

### **Suspects or Criminals: crime, appearance, traits and methods**

The main criminal in *Collateral* is Vincent. Vincent is a contract killer hired by Felix to kill off a series of witnesses and legal representatives in a federal indictment case. He wears a grey suit with a tie, wears sunglasses and carries a briefcase. His initial appearance is almost business-like, a reflection of how he views his work. Ultimately Vincent represents a drug cartel and organised crime.

Despite the fact he kills almost without remorse, he actually tries to help Max in a variety of ways. He gives Max help with his relationship with Annie, and instructs him to buy flowers for his sick mother. He also saves Max's life when it looks as though an FBI agent is about to shoot. Despite all this, he remains dedicated to his job at hand throughout the entire film and no move is made without a purpose. Vincent also possesses a dry humour which is evident when he states that he killed his own father at age 12, before laughing it off as a joke. He also states following the shootout at *Fever* that "the only thing that didn't show up was the Polish cavalry."

Vincent's crimes consist of 12 murders, including an undercover informant, Ramone, lawyer Sylvester Clarke, Jazz musician Daniel Baker and witness Peter Lim, along with numerous FBI agents and detective Ray Manning.

Vincent is also an extreme opportunist. When he finds out that Max's mother is in hospital he uses this knowledge and holds it against Max. When Max starts to fight back against Vincent and tells him that he "can't do it," Vincent replies coldly "if you're not back in ten minutes I take the cab and murder your mother on my way out of town."

The other criminal in *Collateral* is Felix Ray Esterana, a Mexican crime lord connected to drugs among other things. He sports a neat beard and well-kept black hair. Like Vincent, he wears a grey suit. Felix also likes to use stories or analogies to help explain ideas or concepts. He uses both Humpty Dumpty and Santa Claus to explain his feelings.

**Issues:**

There are a number of issues addressed in Michael Mann's film, *Collateral*. The first of these is the socio-economic divide still prominent in American society. Those in society who are rich stay rich and those who are poor stay poor. Max has big plans for the future as he hopes to own and operate a limousine company, *Island Limos*. However, as a result of the attitudes of the society, Max is imprisoned in his current job, and as a taxi-driver is expected to stay at the bottom of society.

The other issue addressed in *Collateral* is the value of life. Vincent kills numerous people throughout the film almost unconsciously and the responders, along with Max, are expected to place a value on life. Vincent's attitude is that a person is just "a speck in the universe" and is not worth getting uptight about. Max values his own life and that of others around him.

These two issues, the quest for money in social divisions, and the value of life comes together in Vincent's work as he is hired by those in the top tier of the social classes to take out 'nuisances' for his clients.

**Alterations to Generic Conventions:**

As the film is a refinement crime fiction text, there are a number of alterations to generic conventions. The first of these and most obvious is the fact that the official LAPD detective, the one in which the majority of responders would have guessed would solve the case, is killed before the end. Detective Ray Fanning, who pieces together the clues, evidence and murder victims to finally work out what's going on, is killed so suddenly that much of the audience would have been checking their eyes. Fanning is introduced as the smart, good guy who would have, in a classic embryonic text, pieced together the crime and saved Max. However, the text turns so sharply and Max is left to fend for himself.

Another alteration to generic convention is the fact that an inexperienced character is thrown into the role of sleuth. In golden age and embryonic crime fiction texts, the sleuth was either a detective, private eye or someone with experience in the criminology business. However, in *Collateral*, Max is a simple cab driver who has never been involved with crime before. He is thrust into the role when Fanning is killed and he is the only one who can save Annie.

He "solves" the crime by outsmarting Vincent and doing exactly what Vincent had been trying to teach him all night, to be impulsive. He does not really want to kill Vincent but in the end has no choice.

It is not the detective that solves the crime, but a cab driver caught up in an ugly situation.

**Filmic Features: Include quotes**

- Use of juxtaposition of shots. Right at the beginning of the film there are three overhead shots of Max driving his cab around LA. This is used to show how a cab driver can experience people from so many different walks of life in a single day. It also sets the scene for the idea that even though a cabbie's day can be weird, it will be relatively normal in comparison to what will happen later that night.
- Use of diegetic, pleasant music that turns out to be the song on the radio as Max drives Annie to her apartment. The mis-en-scene of this set of shots is particularly important as it is the calm before the storm. The pleasant music is played from the radio as the impeccably clean cab reflects the dazzling lights of LA. There are numerous shots of the cab as it travels through overpasses and underpasses and we see the cab from just about every angle. This sequence of shots allows the responder to become relaxed into the film. It also develops the setting for the crimes that will be committed later in the evening.
- Use of irony. Max feels that sometimes driving a cab can be stressful and so he says that "when things get heavy for me, I take five minutes out, and I just go there," referring to a picture of an island getaway on the back of his sun visor. The irony emerges from the fact that he gives the picture to Annie on the very night that he'll need it most. This aligns with crime fiction in that when Max is placed in danger, he is without his 'getaway.'
- Intertextuality. When Max tries to clean up his cab after Ramone lands on it, Vincent describes Max as "Lady MacBeth", insinuating that Max is trying to wash his hands clean of the murder just like Lady MacBeth. By incorporating a well known character as intertextuality, a whole set of meanings can be applied to the situation without chewing up valuable screen time explaining Vincent's feelings at a stage of the film that needs to keep moving.
- Repetition of shot. The shot of Max in the front seat driving, and Vincent in the back as looking through the front windscreen is one used over and over in the film. This enables the viewer to connect with how Max is feeling and the shot is representational of square one. Every time Vincent stops to kill someone, Max tries some manner of escape attempt, and when he fails, the first shot we see of them back in the cab is the one looking through the front windscreen at them. When we see this scene, we realise that Max has tried and failed to escape his night of torture and is back at square one. Once again relating to the convention detailing the detective must be placed in danger.
- The echo of diegetic sounds. When Vincent takes out his targets that he has been hired to kill, he uses a silencer. However, when he takes out the street punks, he fires unsilenced rounds into the concrete that echo extremely loud. The echo off the cold concrete is a reflection of the manner in which they were killed.

- Use of humour. After three of Vincent's targets have been eliminated, the two visit Max's mother in hospital. After the horrendous previous events, the use of humour gives the audience a chance to gather their thoughts and also show the attachment growing between Max and Vincent. When Max brings in flowers that Vincent insisted he buy, his mother tells him it was a "waste of money." Max gives Vincent a look and explains that Vincent paid for them. Once Max's mother learns this, she states that "they're beautiful" and Vincent gives Max a definite look of 'I told you so.'

The following conversation occurs:

**Max:** Mother this is Vincent, Vincent this is my mother Ida.  
**Vincent:** I'm very happy to meet you.  
**Ida:** Just call me Ida.  
**Vincent:** I was with Max when he got the call.  
**Ida:** And you came all the way over here.  
**Vincent:** It was nothing, mam  
**Ida:** Tell my son, you'd have to hold a gun to his head to make him do anything.  
 You must be one of Max's important clients.  
**Vincent:** I like to think of myself as his friend  
**Ida:** Max never had many friends, always talking to himself in the mirror, it's unhealthy.  
**Max:** Mum, how many times I gotta ask you not to do that.  
**Ida:** Do what?  
**Max:** Don't talk about me like I'm not in the room right here.  
**Ida:** What's he saying?  
**Vincent:** He says he standing right here, in the room here  
**Ida:** Yes you are! He's sensitive  
**Vincent:** I know.

This exchange between the three of them provides comic relief and lightens the mood before the film becomes much darker. It is also used by Vincent as an insurance policy against Max to ensure he doesn't turn on him.

- Shaky shots. After Max has been hijacked by Vincent, the shots of him driving his cab have gone from being smooth to shaky shots. This shows how Max's normally calm night has been shaken up.
- The use of silence. The FBI have just been discussing and planning their plans to get Peter Lim out of *Fever*. This is followed by the scene of Max and Vincent travelling there in total silence. This shows how the two parties prepare themselves for a big confrontation and also show how the two groups couldn't be more different.
- The use of lighting and neo noir. When Vincent is hunting Annie in the dark library we see various shadows and streaks of light appear across both Vincent's and Annie's faces. This helps to build the tension and also give the feeling that we don't know where Vincent is exactly.

- Use of zoom. When Vincent jumps on the back of the train, the camera zooms right up to his eyes. This shows how the chase is coming to an end and how close Vincent is getting.
- Repetition of a quote. At the beginning of the film Vincent tells Max of a guy who “gets on the MTA here, dies. Six hours he’s riding the subway before anybody notices his corpse doing laps around LA. People on and off sitting next to him, nobody notices.” Vincent then, quite ironically, dies on the subway and his last words are “guy gets on the MTA, think anybody will notice?”
- Use of symbolism. As Max and Vincent drive their cab towards the nightclub *Fever*, where the night’s events take an even darker turn, a black limousine turns into the driveway of the nightclub next door to *Fever*. This is representational and becomes a metonym for the dream that Max had been hoping for but is slowly slipping away.

### **Contrast/Comparison with *The Big Sleep*:**

#### **Comparison:**

- Both texts have characters that have committed previous crimes before the setting of the texts. They are both known criminals who meet their end in the texts.
- Both official sleuths have little idiosyncrasies when they are thinking. Fanning strokes his beard and chin whilst Marlowe pulls his ear. This shows the audience when the detectives are about to come to a conclusion and act.
- Both texts are set in Los Angeles.
- Both texts have crime lords, who at first appear to be successful businessmen. Eddie Marrs owns a gambling house and Felix has a family and children, yet both of them are responsible for the bad and cynical deeds done in the texts.
- Both texts set a lot of the action in a car. This shows that the plot is always on the move.
- Both texts are films.
- Both texts are viewed in the third person.
- Both official sleuths, Fanning and Marlowe, have altercations with other members of the official police force. Marlowe is told to lay off by the district attorney’s office and Fanning’s case is taken over by the FBI.
- The majority of the murders in both texts are by gunshot. This shows how both societies value their weapons and their constitutional right to use them.

**Contrast:**

- *The Big Sleep* is a film set in 1940's whilst *Collateral* is set in 2004.
- The women in *The Big Sleep* are marginalised and seen as not smart enough to orchestrate a crime. In *Collateral*, whilst no women take part in the crime, Annie Farrell is a respected lawyer, a position that she would not have been able to take up during Marlowe's time.
- There is no mention of people from other races in *The Big Sleep*. In *Collateral*, however, there are people of numerous races including Felix, Max, Annie Farrel, Ray Fanning, Ramone, Peter Lim and Daniel Baker. All these characters play crucial roles.
- The official sleuth in *Collateral* dies, whilst Marlowe outsmarts the crooks and he survives.
- There is an unofficial sleuth in *Collateral*, Max, as he is thrust into the role rather unwittingly. Marlowe, on the other hand, has had experience at solving crimes.
- There are effectively two sleuths in *Collateral*, Max and Fanning, whilst in *The Big Sleep* there is just Marlowe.
- Max is the only sleuth we refer to on a first name basis. Fanning, Marlowe and even Holmes are always referred to by surname. This shows how much of an impromptu sleuth Max is and shows how inexperienced he is at dealing with these sorts of situations.

**Personal Response:**

The text has an enticing beginning with Vincent walking through the airport and collecting a briefcase. This made me want to see what was in the briefcase and what it meant for Max, as we see him start his shift for the night.

The murky details about who is Vincent, and what is he doing at each stop, kept me interested and wanting to keep watching.

The plot thickened as more murders were committed, and as Fanning helped to unravel the clues, I started to realise how the victims were connected.

There are a number of reasons why *Collateral* has become so valued:

- It contains two big names who enjoy immensely entertaining on-screen chemistry in Jamie Foxx and Tom Cruise.
- It gives a real insight into modern Los Angeles in an age of terrorism. The film was made just three years after 9/11 and explores the theme of anti-terrorism operations.

- Michael Mann is regarded as one of modern society's greatest directors and this work will be one highly valued due to its plot, themes and visual effects.
- It is a great example of a refinement crime fiction text where the detective is killed before the crime is solved.

All in all, I enjoyed it immensely and *Collateral* is indeed a classic refinement crime fiction text.