
THE MOB AND THE MOVIES: A CINEMATIC HISTORY OF THE ALL-AMERICAN CRIMINAL

Andrew Graves

Week 4: The McCarthy Era and the Mob

The 50s and the Motion Picture Production Code

- Movie attendance plummeted, the golden age was over
- More blame placed on the MPPC for Hollywood's slump
- Gimmicks – sex – *A Street Car Named Desire*
- The film proved that an adult picture could be profitable – despite what the MPPC and the Legion of Decency had to say

The Miracle (1952)

- In 1951 "The Miracle" in particular sparked widespread moral outrage, and was criticized as "vile, harmful and blasphemous."
- Three members of the New York State Board of Regents were subsequently ordered to examine the film; they concluded that "The Miracle" was "sacrilegious"
- The hearing determined that the film indeed constituted religious bigotry and on February 16, 1951, the Commissioner of Education was ordered to rescind the picture's license.

The Appeal

- Film distributor Joseph Burstyn appealed to the Supreme Court
- The appeal was successful and became a landmark decision
- It determined that provisions of the New York Education Law which allowed a censor to forbid the commercial showing of a motion picture film it deemed to be "sacrilegious" and was a "restraint on freedom of speech" and thereby a violation of the First Amendment.
- In doing this it was recognizing that a film was an artistic medium entitled to protection under the First Amendment
- Motion pictures were protected by the American Constitution
- Joe Breen stepped down in 1953

On the Waterfront (1954)

- Directed by Elia Kazan
- Written by Bud Schulberg
- Based on a series of articles by Malcom Johnson
- Produced by Sam Spiegel
- Cinematography by Boris Kaufman
- Edited by Gene Milford
- Music by Leonard Bernstein

On the Waterfront (1954) CONT...

Context

- Mobsters would infiltrate businesses or operations
- Often this would involve the derailment of trade unions
- Workers would be intimidated to join these bogus outfits paying subs to ensure they stayed on the payroll
- However, unlike actual unions, the workers would receive no benefits, and could wind up out of work, badly injured or worse if they refused to play ball

Elia Kazan

- Elia Kazan had been criticized by some of his peers for identifying eight communists working in Hollywood, before the House of Un-American Activities
- Originally Arthur Miller had been approached to write the script, which he did, but walked away from the project when Kazan requested he changed the mobsters in the film to communists
- The fact that the final film does portray the antagonists as mobsters not communists, is largely interpreted as Kazan's answer to the criticism he received

The Film

- It's tenement Shakespeare
- It is both a kitchen sink tale and a heightened, complicated love story
- Unlike many cinematic representations of criminals, these villains are not in the least bit romanticized, beyond their 'gangster-style' apparel and " \$150.00 dollar suits"
- Johnny Friendly (Lee J Cobb), is a nasty, loud mouthed bully, whose weaknesses and cruelties are exposed throughout
- Kazan's 'answer' to criticism seems most keenly bought to life in the faces of the 'workforce' who, under pressure from outside forces, go along with an absurdly unfair system
- Malloy, a washed-up bum of an ex-fighter, at first benefits from the handouts of the ruthless gangster, so happily goes along with the system too
- Though Malloy eventually relinquishes and fights back, we as an audience are left asking whether we would have done the same or waited in the shadows with the 'sheepish' dock workers
- This clearly feels like Kazan is challenging our righteous standpoint

Stanley Kubrick in the 50s

"Kubrick's oeuvre is divided into two periods, before and after 2001. Besides the introduction of colour...a less visible demarcation line is traced by his ongoing struggle to overcome the influence of (Orson) Welles.

After a first period in which every image designated him as Welles's successor, nothing Kubrick did after 2001 resembles anything by Welles, because this is when Kubrick began making films that are like no films that had ever been seen, including his own."

Bill Krohn

The Killing (1956)

- Directed by Stanley Kubrick
- Screenplay by Stanley Kubrick
- Dialogue by Jim Thompson
- Based on *Clean Break* by Lionel White
- Produced by James B Harris
- Cinematography by Lucien Ballard
- Edited by Betty Steinberg
- Music by Gerald Fried
- It's a heist movie
- It's a 'gangster tragedy'
- It's a film noir

"The Killing is my favourite heist film."

Quentin Tarantino

- Does not play out in the usual narrative manner
- We don't simply jump from one character to another in chronological order.
- Instead we dance around in time shifting from different points of view, showcasing alternative storylines
- As with many of Kubrick's later films it has a keen sense of logic and detail
- *"The Killing is a piece of logistical bravura"* – *A Pictorial History of Crime Films* Ian Cameron

The Plot

- A gang plan to carry out a race track robbery
- Using the diversionary tactic of shooting a horse they hope to score big
- However, within the tight-knit group, betrayal and human fallibility comes to to spoil their otherwise perfect plans

"Poor Elisha Cook Jr...he's always been fated to take the rap. A Specialist in bell-hops, hotel desk-clerks and downtrodden underlings, Elisha Cook Jr. has carved a niche for himself in the underworld film..."

The Movie Treasury: Gangster Movies – Harry Hossent

"...The Killing was one of the most skilful and entertaining suspense movies of the fifties. It mesmerised like a ticking time-bomb and every few minutes, with sure craft, Kubrick notched up a new peak of suspense..."

The Movie Treasury: Thriller Movies – Lawrence Hammond

The Late 50s

"Against this cultural background in which family life defined social norms, The Searchers, A Touch of Evil, Vertigo and Rio Bravo concerned isolated middle-aged men and their complex attachments to women. In this era of American history where families were central, not one of these men belonged to one"

The Story of Film - Mark Cousins

***A Touch of Evil* (1958)**

- Directed by Orson Welles
 - Screenplay by Orson Welles
 - Based on *Badge of Evil* by Whit Masterson
 - Produced by Albert Zugsmith
 - Cinematography by Russell Metty
 - Edited by Virgil Vogel and Aaron Stell
 - Music by Henry Mancini
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- The low angle shots coupled with cameras ‘watching’ from above create an odd, off-kilter presentation – we feel like unwelcome voyeurs
 - The shadows, night-time settings and character set-ups give it an unmistakably Film Noir-ish feel
 - However, the on-location filming (Venice, California) and use of actual driving cars, give the film a modern look, taking much from Italian Neo-realist cinema or the French New Wave