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

Andrew Graves

Week 3: Guys With No Future...

Angels with Dirty Faces (1938)

Michael Curtiz

- Directed by Michael Curtiz
 - Written by John Wexley and Warren Duff
 - Based on the idea by Rowland Brown
 - Produced by Samuel Bischoff
 - Edited by Owen Marks
 - Cinematography by Sol Polito
 - Music by Max Steiner
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- Rowland Brown came up with the scenario and pitched it to Mervin LeRoy (Warner Bros)
 - LeRoy thought he might use the idea as a vehicle for The Dead-End Kids
 - However, the pair failed to negotiate a fee from Warner Bros
 - Brown managed to cut a deal with First National Pictures
 - First National wanted Cagney as the lead anti-hero
 - At the time, Cagney was beginning to see that Warner Bros was only willing to pay a small percentage of his box office potential
 - Disgruntled, Cagney walked away and filed a lawsuit against Warner Bros, in the hope they would arrange a better financial deal for his services
 - In the meantime, Cagney began working at First National
 - After making one feature for First National, Cagney was offered the role of Rocky (*Angels*), however, not wanting to be typecast as a screen tough, he decided to take on another project
 - When he was offered a much better deal, Cagney was able to return to Warner Bros
 - On the advice of his manager brother William, Cagney decided to take Brown's scenario with him
 - Warner acquired the story and at first offered the directing job to Mervin LeRoy but he was busy with MGM
 - They then went to Brown, who showed little interest.
 - Eventually they were able to secure the talents of Michael Curtiz
 - Though Cagney was reluctant to do the role, he saw that the plot would allow him to stretch his talents and present as a more complex character
 - Cagney took inspiration from real-life, particularly the death of his childhood friend who wound up being executed in the electric chair

The Prison Break Movie

- As dark as the sub-genre may be at times, the prison break movie has often thrown up thinly veiled examinations of the human spirit, from *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979) to *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), these silver screen vehicles can showcase man's ability to conquer hardship and oppression to prevail against impossible odds.
- But not so with Jules Dassin's grim film noir *Brute Force* (1947)

Brute Force (1947)

Jules Dassin

- Not since the pre-code feature *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) has the depiction of criminal incarceration felt so bleak, desolate and despairing.
- From the opening view of the rain-drenched watchtower at Westgate Penitentiary which dominates the dour skyline, we are besieged with a montage of miserable images set to a wickedly frenetic Miklos Rozsa musical score.
- Exterior glimpses of impenetrable doors intercut with depressing low angle shots of the morose federal building, with its armed guards, reinforced concrete surrounds and impossibly high walls.
- Inside, a severe-looking clock face signifies that the only thing on offer here for the broken men who inhabit the rows and rows of identical cells, is time. Time without meaning.

“...Know how many propositions I've had to crack the wall? Six thousand. They're on tap all the time...[an escape's] been all set every Tuesday for twelve years. Twelve years from now it'll still be next Tuesday.”

- Universal's uncompromising *Brute Force* was essentially the brainchild of the multi-skilled writer, journalist and raconteur, Mark Hellinger.
- Having risen from the world of B movies, where he worked on various low budget numbers such as *The Adventures Jane Arden* (1939), *Women in the Wind* (1939) and the Dead-End Kid's vehicle *Hell's Kitchen* (1939).
- Hellinger quickly became one of Hollywood's top-level producers.
- The first big hit he was partly responsible for was the Raoul Walsh directed Cagney picture *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), which had been based on Hellinger's story *The World Moves on*, which in turn was informed by his early life experiences. The film's onscreen foreword, written by Hellinger himself, would appear to attest this
- Having been contracted to both Warner Bros and 20th Century Fox, Hellinger struck out as an independent producer at Universal where he would helm three devastatingly unforgettable pictures, *The Killers* (1946), which would make stars of both Ava Gardner and Burt Lancaster, *The Naked City* (1948) and of course *Brute Force*.
- Inspired by the recent 'Battle of Alcatraz' events, which saw the death of two prison officers and three inmates in a bungled escape bid, *Brute Force*, a foreboding monochrome glance into a forgotten hell of claustrophobic shadowy cells and underworld violence, was born out of Hellinger's desire to create a jail-based movie starring Lancaster who, like himself had recently been freed from his contract with Warner Bros.

Brute Force (1947) CONT...

- Assembling a crack team around him including screenwriter Richard Brooks, cinematographer William H Daniels and director Jules Dassin, Hellinger was able to bring to the screen a lurid, brutal and disconcerting production which like the much later British film *Scum* (1979), became a bleakly austere reminder of the failures inherent in a not fit for purpose, deeply unjust judicial system.
- Never has the prison drama felt like such a keenly uncomfortable microcosmic representation of wider civilisation, and what's more this Post-war effort feels remarkably prescient given its profoundly critical response to a largely divided political system, echoing our ongoing modernity.
- In one scene, we have the heavily liberal Dr Walters (Art Smith) facing off against tyrannical head guard Captain Munsey (Hume Cronyn) while a helpless warden stands equidistant between them.
- In his pathetic attempts to appease both extremes his order becomes a joke, the inmates are placed in danger and a leaderless vacuum is filled by wanton opportunism, in a dark world bereft of nuance or understanding.
- Undoubtedly a gripping example of second-wave film noir, with its edgy crime rumblings and gritty realism, it makes sense too, that the film should be a Universal production, given that studios early success with horror.
- Though at this stage, it had all but turned its back on its once-lucrative series of scary movies, their influence still lurks within the grim confines of this murky presentation.
- Not only does the composition and cinematography occasionally lean towards German Expressionism with, its sinister shots of long corridors and dangerous dark corners, it also perhaps makes its most obvious concession to past monsters with its visually stunning *Frankenstein* (1931) like climax.
- Just as Karloff as the creature in James Whale's classic had launched his unfortunate creator from the top of a burning windmill, here Joe Collins (Lancaster) throws Munsey to his death from the machine gun tower while the flames of rebellion burn around them.
- While Collin Clive's Dr Frankenstein had created a monster, which turns against him, here, Munsey's unequal system unleashes a violent, if temporary uprising.
- Unlike other jailhouse features, such as *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) or *Papillon* (1973) there is no recognisable protagonist.
- Lancaster might be the top billing star and his sterling work ensures that this is another coldly spot-on performance, but for many sections of the film he slinks into the background gloom and it becomes more of an ensemble piece, shining its dim light on other members of the cast.
- It's brief flashback scenes almost give Dassin's movie an anthology feel as we dip in and out of the past lives of range of unfortunate characters.
- But no film noir would be complete without its Femme Fatale, and here that archetype is fleetingly suggested with quick cameos by the likes of Yvonne De Carlo, Ann Blyth, Ella Raines and Anita Colby, undoubtedly included for their lobby card inducing audience appeal as 'the women on the outside'
- Central to the action though is Hume Cronyn's control freak Captain. His diminutive figure and oversized guard's hat give him an almost comic appeal and this is perhaps the crux of this vicious antagonist's despicable *raison d'être*.
- Munsey is the archetypal school bully, the little man too weak to make waves beyond the prison walls. Outside we sense he's a nobody, a jumped-up public servant, but inside, given ultimate power and responsibility he is able to twist his bitterness into something lethal and all-consuming, he becomes the despot of a tiny world where ethics and concepts like kinship are left at the solid iron door.
- As Doctor Walters admonishes when challenging Munsey about his unorthodox techniques.

***Brute Force* (1947) CONT...**

“Control them? You mean torture them, don’t you? The more pain you inflict the more pleasure you get. That’s why you’d never resign from this prison. Where else would find so many helpless flies to stick pins into?”

- *Brute Force* though, equally moves beyond the trappings of merely presenting us with good or bad characters, so damning is the presentation in terms of its examination of societal woes, that the real villain of the piece seems to be the system itself.
- The ticking time bomb of frustration and anger mounts as the story plays out, the palpable sense of tension never feels more so potentially explosive as when the convicts are crammed into tiny cells with nothing but their pasts and the false promise of a future to give them hope.
- Providing a Greek chorus to this unfolding tragedy is Calypso, played by Trinidadian singer and actor Victor Edward Pinard AKA Sir Lancelot.
- Lancelot was a major influence on future star Harry Belafonte and had featured in several films beforehand including three Val Lewton horror pictures *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), *The Ghost Ship* (1943) and *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944), as well the seminal Bogart/Bacall classic *To Have and Have Not* (1944).
- Here though his gentle velvet crooning, which sits between the sombre set pieces and sweating hairy-chested brutality, only adds to the misery, his Caribbean ditties becoming a deathly narrative devoid of comic distraction.
- Not once are we afforded the chance of hope, again and again, we are reminded that prison can only ever be a one-way contamination, and that a convict’s ‘life’ is hardly that at all.
- Even those who manage to leave behind its physical confines do so with a heavy burden, for here true rehabilitation is a fantasy.
- As one beleaguered character notes towards the end of the picture.

“Nobody escapes. Nobody ever really escapes”

***White Heat* (1949)**

Raoul Walsh

- Directed by Raoul Walsh
- Screenplay by Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts
- Based on the story by Virginia Kellogg
- Produced by Louis F Edelman
- Cinematography by Sidney Hickox
- Edited by Owen Marks
- Music by Max Steiner
- Warner Bros bought the rights to the story for \$2000
- The story was adapted by Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts
- Being perfectionists they spent six months polishing the script
- The original story had been based on the real-life Ma Baker and her criminal sons, however this was changed to incorporate Cagney’s role
- Arthur Baker became Arthur ‘Cody’ Jarrett
- Far from being a two-bit tough guy, Jarrett is a complex psychopath with a disturbing mother fixation

