

***PUBLIC ENEMIES, PUBLIC HEROES: SCREENING THE GANGSTER FROM LITTLE CAESAR TO TOUCH OF EVIL\****

by

**Tony Hilfer**  
**University of Texas**

Book: *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening The Gangster From Little Caesar to Touch of Evil*

Author: Jonathan Munby

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Jonathan Munby's book on gangster films has four main threads: an argument that gangster films, contra Adorno's reading of Mass Culture ideology, subvert rather than recuperate the dominant ideology; that they were, for cause, a main target of film censorship; that the gangster genre transmuted in response to historical change; and that film noir was less a dramatic new departure than a continuation of the gangster genre. These threads are interestingly interwoven to give us a new and useful view of the genre and its political intimations.

The argument on subversion is supported by Munby's mini-history of the forms of film censorship which were themselves respondent to historical conditions. Munby uses the censors' aversion to the gangster genre as a central argument against Adorno's dictum in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" that the culture industry reliably deflects any questioning of the power elite. Munby asks: "If the post-Crash talking gangster only 'reinforced' older success mythology and governing laws, why did it warrant censure" (p. 16)? Another thread of Munby's argument implicated in this question is how the introduction of sound into motion pictures revolutionized the gangster film. His argument is that "pre-Crash silent-era gangster films were part of a general middle-class moral crusade to both redeem and stigmatize the ethnic ghetto. The latter was subjected in fiction and film to the conventions of moral 'uplift' narratives" (pp. 4-5). But the revulsion from the financial powers implicated in the Crash combined with the new technology of sound to give both motive and possibility for ethnically and ideologically oppositional voices.

Munby focuses on the gangster classics, *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*. That these films upset the cultural authorities is evident: in 1935 the genre of gangster films was banned and *Public Enemy* and *Little Caesar* were not allowed to be re-released until 1953 and even then not for export lest they give a bad impression abroad of American life (p. 107). The protagonists of these films were Italian American in the first and third and Irish American in the second. The actors of these roles were two Jewish Americans, Edward G. Robinson and Paul Muni, playing Italians, and Jimmy Cagney playing what he was, an Irish American. These three actors all came from the mean streets of the lower East Side and they conveyed an ethnic lower-class, markedly urban, and markedly not urbane voice. In one respect, however, they might seem traditional American heroes but in a very different key. The historian Richard Pells, cited by

Munby, sees the gangster hero as “a psychopathic Horatio Alger” (p. 17). The films imply their rise to (temporary) success may not be so different from the approved model. Even their psychopathology, more apparent in *Little Caesar* and especially in *Scarface* than in *Public Enemy’s* Tommy Powers, may not work in an unequivocally negative fashion. It can appear as a form of energy, of power, that fascinates more than repels us.

The argument has been made that just these features of the gangster film recuperate more than oppose the prevailing values. Is not the valorization of success and power reinforced by baring the ruthlessness of their pursuit? And contrariwise do not these films always have a scene where the authorities denounce the antisocial ways of the gangsters? And do not the gangster protagonists end up dead, even in the gutter, thus showing the futility of their ethos? Indeed these motifs are a constant of thirties gangster films but Munby argues that they are double coded. Munby cites the uncomfortably convincing argument Tommy Powers uses against his conventionally honest brother:

Mike enlists to fight in World War I; Tommy thinks he’s crazy. Mike works a legitimate job as a ticket collector on the trams; Tommy sees this as self-exploitation. Mike attends night school in an attempt to improve his social and economic lot; Tommy’s reaction is that Mike is only ‘learning how to be poor’ (p. 52).

It sounds rather like a script from Berthold Brecht.

Munby’s argument chimes with Robert Warshow’s classic essay on the gangster film which shows how ambivalence about the American values of individualism and success are embodied in the violent conclusion of the gangster film: “No convention of the gangster film is more strongly established than this: it is dangerous to be alone. And yet the very condition of success makes it impossible not to be alone, for success is always the establishment of an individual pre-eminence that must be imposed on others, in whom it automatically arouses hatred; the successful man is an outlaw. The gangster’s whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd, the final bullet thrusts him back, makes him after all, a failure” (p. 133). This represents a general failure precisely of the quest for success: “In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, all means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is punished for success” (p. 133). Tommy Powers, lying in the gutter full of bullet holes, put it perfectly: “I ain’t so tough.” As for the moralizing frame of the gangster film, Munby shows that not only did the censors of the Hays code externally impose it but also that it could itself become a subversive device.

Thus the censors insisted that a framing scene be added to *Scarface*, though its director, Howard Hawks, objected so strenuously that he refused to participate in shooting the added scene. But the frame turns out to turn the tables on the censors as the authorities, congregated in a newspaper office, reveal their status “first by accent and second by the content, style, and vocabulary of the spoken communication. These figures of official society deliver their moral diatribe about gangsterdom in distinctly Anglo tones” (p. 59). Moreover, the addition is in marked visual contrast to the body of the film: “The camera remains fixed and static, filming

from a stable establishing-shot distance. The scene is brightly and flatly lit. All this is surely out of character with the rest of the film's use of extreme high- or low-camera angles and chiaroscuro low-key high-contrast lighting. The imposed ideology of the scene is sabotaged by its foregrounding as 'artificial and ideologically imposed'" (ibid.). Surely the last thing censors wish is to be discerned mucking about in the film, spoiling the audience's pleasure. Another apt instance Munby cites is the framing scene in *Asphalt Jungle* where the police commissioner describes the protagonist Dix as a cold-hearted murderer when the audience has been shown he is the most honorable character in the film. In the film's affecting final scene we see Dix die as he desperately tries to return to the Kentucky horse farm of his youth, making him emblematic of betrayed American rural values.

*Asphalt Jungle* differs from the thirties cycle of gangster films in that its protagonist is a displaced country boy rather than to the mean streets born and that he is a follower, not a leader. This and other postwar syndicate gangster films respond to a new historical situation born of the mass organizational necessities of World War II. Americans emerged from the regimentation of the army to a newly regimented home front, corporate America. Alienation is no longer ethnic but generalized. The gangster is no longer an exaggerated image of the individualistic entrepreneur: "most syndicate films concern the plight of an individual (normally a syndicate foot soldier) working against an impersonal and brutal system. Most obviously, such films constitute ways to dramatize people's general concerns about the relations of power between themselves and the organizations they serve" (pp. 126-7). An intensified subjective focus is evident in these films, an aura of entrapment and psychopathology. The psychopathology is notable in the postwar Cagney gangster film, *White Heat* where Cagney's character (Cody Jarrett) suffers from a mother complex and crippling psychosomatic headaches. Cody Jarrett is deprived, as the postwar gangsters frequently were, of ethnic edge and is a less attractive character than Tommy Powers. Thus the FBI agent played by Edmond O'Brien could be conceived as the protagonist of the film. But Munby arrestingly argues, "the appeal of Cagney's performance rests in part on his rejection of the sinister aspects of a conforming culture embodied in Edmond O'Brien's faceless (and duplicitous) undercover FBI agent" (p. 119). In support of Munby's argument I would challenge anyone to remember a single line of Edmond O'Brien's or to forget Cagney/Jarrett's final defiant "Made it Ma! Top of the world!" This is followed by his explosive apotheosis, another instance where the violent end of the gangster does not necessarily function moralistically.

Munby also briefly notes a critically neglected film of this period, Jules Dassin's *Brute Force*, a prison film in which "the prisoners are cast as common men whose 'normal' bourgeois desires lead them to crime. The psychologically unstable paranoiacs in this film are not the incarcerated criminals but the prison guards and warden" (p. 163). It is not coincidental that Dassin soon after was blacklisted and had to leave for Europe in order to continue to make films.

The HUAC 'investigation' of Hollywood film was another of the changing faces of censorship Munby examines. In the course of the book he shows the different motives and strategies of Will Hays, the representative of rural Protestant values, Joseph Breen, who brought an urban Catholic perspective, and, finally, of Eric Johnston who attempted to make Hollywood an exemplar of "the postwar liberal consensus" of democratic capitalism (p. 172). If anything Johnston's emphasis on a relentlessly positive outlook, on the social engineering of a more benign society, seems more sinister than the prohibitors of the thirties. Nevertheless some nicely

ugly movies emerged in the film noir genre, which Munby argues was not a distinct new genre so much as a transmutation of the gangster film:

The increasingly preponderant fascination with crime on the American screen after World War II was understood in its day not as something new or discontinuous with Hollywood's traditions, but as a rejuvenation of the illicit themes and issues associated with the earlier depression-era gangster cycle. The postwar crime cycle we now call film noir was received as an awkward reminder of problems whose resolution had been postponed by the need to prosecute the war (p. 7).

Munby sees the end of this new cycle in *Touch of Evil*, arguing that after it only neo-noir was possible.

This last claim seems at the least debatable, especially in the absence of a definition of neo-noir, hardly a self-evident category. Although Munby has some provocative observation about film noir this part of his book seems a bit sketchy, not as well thought out as the chapters on gangster films. In sum, although the overall argument of Munby's book is persuasive and his book is a major contribution to the study of the gangster genre and is suggestive in relation to genre study generally, I do have a few general reservations and a few particular quibbles.

I like his argument against Adorno's unqualified attack on Mass culture. But I think there is something to be said for a more mediated view such as the one argued by Munby's bete noire, Robert Ray, whose book, *A Certain Tendency of Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*, Munby almost obsessively recurs to. Munby attacks the concept he attributes to Ray that:

The gangster film only ostensibly related to the changing 'real' world and actually played out the familiar oppositions that had come to structure much of traditional American (western) mythology: country (small town) versus city, individualism versus community, self-interest versus social responsibility, corruption versus virtue, desire versus gratification, leisure versus work, sexual expression versus moral rectitude (p. 26).

Munby convinces me that gangster films accentuated "hyphenated identity as a competing authentic American condition" (p. 26). But Ray mentions only one gangster film, *Angels with Dirty Faces* as carrying over this western structure and does not claim it to be typical of the genre. Moreover Ray's analysis of Hollywood film is more nuanced than Munby represents it as being. Ray is writing about a tendency in Hollywood cinema, not about all Hollywood films. And he makes a good case for the tendency of classic Hollywood films to reconcile contradictions by converting "all political, sociological, and economic dilemmas into personal melodramas" (Ray 1985, p. 57). Thus "*Casablanca* displaced American anxiety about intervention in World War II into Rick's hesitation about helping Victor Laszlo" (ibid.). The pattern is indeed remarkably consistent as is that of the individualist hero, even one conspicuously contemptuous and avoidant of community becoming the community's savior as in *Casablanca*, *Stalag 17*, and to a comic extreme in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* wherein the alienated protagonist, played by Clint Eastwood at his stoniest, spends most of the film trying to flee community only to become the paterfamilias of a community organized around his protective strength.

That this is not the whole story Ray acknowledges. Indeed Ray argues against “the formalist essentialism in which certain stylistic procedures are labeled in advance as inherently ‘repressive’ or ‘alienating’ regardless of the ends they serve or the contexts in which they appear” (Ray 1985, p. 8). Here he is talking camera angle and lighting but surely his dictum applies as well to genre. Ray and Munby seem then on the same page when Munby argues against Mary Ann Doane’s technically essentialist claim that sound in film was ideologically reactionary in helping to intensify Hollywood’s reproduction of a seamless and natural image of the world (Munby 1999, p. 42). Ray even supplies a useful rule of thumb for subversive effects, noting Charles Ekert’s argument that “truly effective challenges to Hollywood’s prevailing ideology surface in those moments within a movie when the emotional quotient is simply excessive in terms of the narrative needs—emotion, in other words, that remains inadequately motivated” (Ray 1985, pp. 18-19). One thinks of Cody Jarrett/Jimmy Cagney atop the petroleum tower, ecstatically proclaiming “Top of the world!” This is not to say that we are all being urged to blow up parts of the county we reside in or to take to the streets demanding economic justice. There is no sure measure of the actual political effects of mass culture products—or those of high culture, for that matter—on their audiences.

This is an old and ongoing debate. In a seminal early essay collection entitled *Mass Culture* (1957) the two editors, Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White were in diametrical disagreement. For Rosenberg, “At its worst, mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste, but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism” (p. 9). Whereas White deplores the tendency of “xenophilic critics who discuss American culture as if they were holding a dead vermin in their hands” (p. 14). In the 1950s critics from both the political right (Ernest van den Haag) and the political left (Irving Howe) were at one in looking with alarm at mass culture. One gets the impression from Munby that this is still the case and he is embattled on all sides in his affirmation of a mass culture genre but surely this no longer the case. The newer critiques are more along the line of Carol Clover’s breakthrough study, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, which not only disputed Laura Mulvey’s orthodox dogma that Hollywood film is always structured around the sadistic male “gaze” at the female object but dared to proclaim slasher films (e.g., *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Halloween*) and rape-revenge films (e.g., *I Spit on Your Grave*) were equivocal, tangled, and to some degree even oddly progressive rather than uniformly fiendishly misogynistic in their sexual politics. Clover had a notably tougher row to hoe than Munby in her revisionary study and made good on it. She convinces me that *Thelma and Louise* was, if anything, a watered-down version of *I Spit on Your Grave*. I would like to close on Clover’s expression of alarm at the decline of the mostly independently made low-budget horror movie, an instance that parallels the decline of the gangster film as Munby so well analyzed it:

Deprived of the creative wellspring of the low tradition, I suspect, larger studios are more likely than before to imitate their own tried-and-true formulas and less likely to take a flier on the kind of bizarre and brilliant themes that can bubble up from the bottom. (Clover 1992, p. 236)

## ENDNOTE

\* Direct correspondence to Tony Hilfer, Department of English, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78712. Tony Hilfer is the author of numerous books and articles including *The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) and *The New Hegemony in Literary Studies: Contradictions in Theory* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003).

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