

INTERROGATIONS OF MASCULINITY: VIOLENCE AND THE RETRO-GANGSTER CYCLE OF THE 60s

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American manhood is governed by a sense of exclusion and fear, elements that have been incorporated into many of the films produced in classical Hollywood as well as contemporary Hollywood. The metaphor of the “suit” in 1950s Hollywood films as a representation of manhood symbolized conformity, consumerism, and the American masculine experience. However as Michael Kimmel notes, “by the 1960s American men felt increasingly alienated, stuck in a rut, unable to escape the dull monotony of a cookie-cutter corporate identity, a suit that was ready-made and waiting to be filled” (264). Yet in gangster films from the 1930s into the 1960s, suits replaced the cowboy’s Western garb as a metaphor of masculinity. The men in the suits were more than simple corporate clones. They were men of action who engaged in violent and sexual acts, and who took control of their destinies. These men illustrated that it was possible for American white males to be more than weak, timid creatures who feared the influence of foreign powers, the threatening potential of women, and the encroachment of African Americans into the public sphere (Kimmel 6-9). In short, these gangster figures demonstrated a form of masculinity that was without emotion, remorse, or even at times intellectual foresight but by the mid to late 1960s this perception would be questioned. Nevertheless these were and remain the qualities celebrated as exemplar of the American male experience.

What was often lacking in the classical Hollywood period was a realistic portrayal of the sexual tension and violence which men may be capable of enacting upon society, especially women. No other genre of film has better represented the desire to capture the feelings of self-interested and selfish men than that of the gangster film.

Robert Warshow identified these characteristics of the genre when he argued that, “the gangster movie...is a story of enterprise and success ending in precipitate failure. Success is conceived as an increasing power to work injury, it belongs to the city, and it is of

course a form of evil (though the gangster's death, presented usually as punishment, is perceived simply as defeat)" (Warshow 89). Thus, the world of the gangster that Warshow mapped was one primarily defined by the city as an environment where men wore suits, lived in fancy apartments, dined in expensive restaurants and relaxed and conducted some business in nightclubs. While on the surface these aspects of the lifestyle seem normal, it was the violence that enabled the upward mobility of these figures which, Warshow argued, mirrored the American dream (Warshow 83). His analysis consisted of his recollections of the 1930's gangster films that had been popular with American audiences. However, the gangster figure has never disappeared from the American consciousness. In fact, the gangster films of the late 1950s and into the 1960s display the true brutality of the gangster in all his sadistic glory. The films *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond*, *Murder Inc.*, and later *Bonnie and Clyde* portray male gangsters as brutal, psychotic figures who enact violence towards other gangsters, forces of law and order, and women to validate their own masculinity.

The first two films I discuss, *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* and *Murder Inc.*, have traditionally been lumped together with a cycle of what Carlos Clarens and other scholars refer to as either "syndicate films" or pseudohistorical biographies (Clarens 251). Syndicate films like *The Racket* (1951) were gangster films in which the "mob" was depicted to function like a corporation rather than a singular enterprise. Films about gangsters such as *Baby Face Nelson* (1957) and the *St. Valentine's Day Massacre* (1967) returned the legendary criminals of America's past from the era of the Roaring 20s to the Depression into the public mindset, in effect creating an element of nostalgia that both mythologized and demythologized the historical figures (Fran Mason 122). The use of the term "cycle" to discuss these films is as equally inadequate as simply lumping these films together as examples of bio-pics which deal with the lives of American gangsters of the 20s and 30s because, as Lee Grieveson notes, "cycles are small, nuanced groupings of films that are not transhistorical and often operate only within one or two seasons of production, whereas trends are broad and inclusive categories made up of interconnected cycles" (3-4). I would argue that the gangster films of the 50s into the 60s represent a trend rather than a cycle because these films span a period of nearly ten years and are linked together in subject matter.

The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond (Boetticher 1960) premiered in New York on 3 February 1960. The film was produced by United States Productions and released by Warner Brothers Pictures. The picture received fairly good reviews and was predicted to break even

at the box office. As *Variety's* review of the film, which appeared on January 27, 1960, indicates, the film was a "well-made gangster biopic with average b.o. outlook" (*Variety* 6). In addition the reviewer chose to highlight the fact that the film was an old fashioned gangster pic "supersaturated with gun fire and fear" (6). It is the fear and fascination of the gangster that engages the viewer as we watch this young man Legs Diamond (Ray Danton) rise through the criminal ranks of the underworld.

In short, he is the exemplar of the self-made man, a term first coined by Henry Clay in a speech to the senate in 1832 (Kimmel 26). The use of the term 'self-made man' became ubiquitous in the 19th century as a way to identify American masculinity and to link it with the ethos of hard work, and rugged individualism.

This idea of the self-made man is easily applicable to the American gangster films of the 1930s. Yet when the gangster again becomes the subject of public fascination in the 1960s, the emphasis shifts from depicting the gangster as a figure who is dangerous and abnormal, a strategy brought about with Hollywood's decision to self-censor from 1934-1967, to that of a debonair, dashing figure that has success with the ladies and uses his ill-gotten wealth to buy all the things that he desires, even respect.

The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond is one example of how the gangster is presented in 1960s Hollywood films. From the opening credits we know that this figure, Legs Diamond, is a man of the city. The title sequence begins with the silhouette of a man in a topcoat and fedora, and as the credits fade into the film this silhouette is superimposed over the image of a 1920s American city. In using this technique the filmmakers highlight the fact that this is the story of a man who towered over his environment and his personal relationships, believing that through violence he could command respect and ensure his success as a man. After the silhouette fades, a brief description of Jack 'Legs' Diamond is inserted over the images of the city. It reads "Jack 'Legs' Diamond was spawned in the 1920s—an era of incredible violence." This brief exposition sets up the story while also providing the film the distance that is required to depict the gangster in a more realistic manner compared to those of the 1930s.

The film is the story of a man who enters a non-descript 1920s American city with his brother. Immediately, the camera shows that these men are visitors to this city because they are each carrying suitcases. These men look like everyone else, but there is the sense that these men are more than average men. This is illustrated when we see Legs grab his brother and duck into a doorway after overhearing

gunshots. There is a cut and then from the character Legs's perspective we see a man being shot as he is trying to rob a jewelry store. Two other men run into the street holding guns and fire at a car as it attempts to escape the scene. The driver is hit, and just like in the Warner gangster films of the 30's we see the car careen out of control as it finally plows into the front entrance of a movie theater. In this brief sequence the film is able to establish its heritage with the classic gangster films. This technique allows the film to deconstruct the older films, which were restricted in the amount of sex and violence that could be shown by the Production code administration. This ability to depict sex and violence in a more realistic and frank fashion occurs in the scene after the shoot out between the cops and robbers. Legs looks down at the bodies with all the other onlookers. The bodies are arranged so that we can see them in the awkward positions in which they fell as they were shot. Also we can see their blood on the pavement and on the black velvet display of the jewelry store window. In the classical era we would only have seen the bodies, but now the brutal truth of crime may be displayed in its ugly reality. Legs looks up at the ledge above them then over to the jewelry store window, and he exclaims, "He didn't use his head."

While this line is whispered to his brother and may seem to be a throwaway intended to generate a sensation of irony and comedy in the viewer, it incorporates Diamond's philosophy of the world. He is a man who believes in acting alone to get what he wants, which in this instance is the jewels. He uses his date with a dance instructor named Alice (Karen Steele) later in the film to enable him to steal the jewels. Thus like other gangster films of the past where women serve as objects of desire and little else, this film uses Alice as a device by which Legs may steal, in the guise of romantic interest.

A second example of Legs acting alone occurs after he has quit his job as a dancer with Alice at the Hotsy Totsy Club. He and his brother are sitting down to celebrate the end of his parole when they see a well-dressed man enter the club surrounded by bodyguards. The man is the famous gang lord Arnold Rothstein and in a single instance Legs decides that he wants to be one of Rothstein's bodyguards. This desire sets up the conflict of the rest of the film and illustrates two types of masculinity in the film, that of the self-made man (Legs) and that of the father figure (Rothstein) who has everything including a beautiful woman, fancy suits, bodyguards and respect. In order for Legs to validate his own masculinity and existence he must take everything Rothstein has— including his life. After he kills Rothstein we watch as Legs begins to kill and destroy each of his competitors. Each murder is celebrated on screen, and the image of

Legs as someone to be feared is altered by this strategy. The review of the film for *Motion Picture Herald* notes that the film “makes of him a sort of hero in reverse, an emphasis which is ineffectively neutralized by pointing out the destruction of the gangland legend that he could not be killed” (*Motion Picture Herald* 573). The importance of Legs as an outlaw figure is that he cannot be killed despite being shot multiple times in the film, and in each case he survives only to kill off those who have attacked him.

It could be argued that Legs’ masculinity is in fact tied to his relationship with Alice, whom he will later marry to avoid prosecution for five murders. While Legs believes that he can achieve anything through a singular activity, what the film demonstrates is that American masculinity is oftentimes coupled with a heterosexual relationship. This reinforces the idea that in Hollywood American men are incomplete without the love and desire of a woman. For example, when Legs marries Alice and provides her with luxury goods such as fur coats, expensive vacations and fancy cars, it corresponds to his rise as more than a body guard—he becomes the boss. Unfortunately, Legs and Alice’s marriage is strained by his desire to be number one and she begins to drink heavily. In an effort to save himself from prosecution Legs suggests that the two of them take a trip.

Thus, he and Alice go to Europe where he finds out through the newsreels that the collective forces of law and order are abolishing his world. The role of the group in the film is juxtaposed with the individual acts performed by Legs and is equated both with law and order as well as crime. When Legs returns and tries to reclaim his place as boss, he discovers that crime is no longer a singular enterprise. It has joined the ranks of the American corporate system and as a result men who go it alone are no longer needed. Legs tells the men of the syndicate that he doesn’t need anybody because he is Legs Diamond. His belief that he is greater than his wife, his friends and his life in the end is shown to be a fallacy. His wife tells him that as long as someone loved him he was safe, but now that he has revealed himself for what he is, a self-centered psychopath, there is no one to save him. Rather than sacrifice herself further, Alice leaves Legs alone in his fancy apartment, where he will be killed because of his arrogance.

When he is finally killed by the syndicate Murder Inc. Boetticher chooses to place the audience in Legs’s position but does not allow them to see the actual hit. The camera is positioned from floor level and looks up at the killer as he opens fire with his gun. By using this technique, the director allows viewers to vicariously feel as if they are being shot. The film ends with Legs’s body being driven away in

an ambulance. His death symbolizes the death of the ideal of self-centeredness that might have been the norm prior to the 1960s, yet it becomes impossible to not consider the effects of women, as well as society, and furthermore perhaps offers viewers an opportunity to rethink masculinity and its qualities in the realm of the 1960s.

The importance of the syndicate *Murder Inc.* became more than a plot point in the film of the same name that was released in July of 1960. In his review of the film, Bosley Crowther noted that the character of Abe Reles was played by Peter Falk in "an amusingly vicious performance" (Crowther 26). Furthermore he notes how Falk is able to create this character into a cold-blooded killer, arguing that "viciousness pours out of him." While it is impossible to ignore the brutality of Abe Reles in the film, what has not been commented on is the fact this is a man who on the surface seems confident but deep beneath that cold veneer lurks a masculine identity that is in crisis.

In this film the sordid history is laid bare of one of the syndicate's primary killers, Abe Reles (Peter Falk) and Joey Collins (Stuart Whitman), a down and out entertainer, who is pressed into helping Reles. Collins, role as an entertainer encourages the more ruthless male characters like Reles to challenge his position as a man and the fact that Reles is able to force Collins into helping the gangsters can be read in terms of a masculine feminine dynamic. In essence Collins becomes a victim equated with the masculine notion of women as weak-willed, easily manipulated individuals who can be coerced into performing any act.

However, Reles like Legs is a self-made man who uses his prowess as a killer and his desire to inflict cruelty on others as a means to influence and impress. Yet unlike Legs Diamond, who is suave and debonair, Abe Reles is shown to be a man who is not good looking and is in fact capable of even greater cruelty. The level of his brutality is indicated in the beginning of the film when we see him shoot an unarmed man in the shadows of his apartment.

As a result of his skills, Reles is recruited to work for Lepke Buchalter, a well-dressed gang lord who controls organized crime in Brooklyn. Reles and his partner are sent to settle one of Lepke's accounts in upstate New York, and this leads to his involvement with Joey Collins. After committing another murder Reles shows up at the Collins' apartment where he sees Eadie (May Britt), Collin's beautiful young wife. He tells Joey that he and Eadie are old friends but she takes umbrage with this claim and this leads Reles to become angry. This anger will manifest itself again in one of the most important scenes of the film.

Reles shows up to call on Joey and finds Eadie alone. She lets him in the apartment and asks him, "What do you want?" As he walks into the space he is annoyed, which Falk emphasizes through the use of his hands. Reles tells Eadie "I wanna get somethin' straight in my mind. Now what was that all about the other day? Why did you insult me? Did I ever bother you?" He inches further into the apartment and Eadie, frightened by his determination, tells him, "You better get out of here." This annoys Reles even more and he says, "Get out? I just got here. I just wanted to talk to you. What's the matter? You're too good for me?" These lines are spoken as he moves closer to her. Eadie backs further into the apartment and he asks her, "What are you runnin for? Come over here!" he commands before grabbing her and ripping her blouse. She runs into the bedroom and he follows saying "Touch ya. I'll touch ya. I'll touch ya good."

This leads to him slapping her and then forcefully throwing her down onto the bed. He dominates the frame and her as he leans over her body. The two of them scuffle and we see his hat slip off his head. Over the images as they slowly dissolve we see the image of a train and we hear the train, which sounds like the scream of a woman. The use of the scream and the train imply that Eadie is being raped and this interpretation is validated in the following scene when Eadie tells her husband Joey that Reles has put his hands and his dirty fingers all over her. This scene also caught the attention of the reviewer for *Motion Picture Herald*, who notes that "Falk is rather an animal type and in due time rapes Miss Britt" (756). Reles' actions demonstrate that he is more of a man because as he says later on if there is something he wants, then he takes it. This belief that men should domineer over women is indicated within the concept of the self-made man, yet interestingly within the film this horrific act ennobles Collins to fight against the mob.

Joey reacts by kicking at a door and swinging his fists in the air violently. He screams, "I'll kill him." Joey is emasculated in this scene and throughout the rest of the film because he has not been able to protect his wife. This inability to protect Eadie ultimately leads to her murder, and Joey testifying against Lepke and his associates.

Reles eventually becomes the target of his employer and this leads to his cooperation with the police and his murder. Interestingly, Reles's death parallels the cinematic technique used to stage Legs Diamond's murder, only this time the camera is placed at the level of the sidewalk so we can see Reles as he plunges to his death from a hotel window.

If there is a moral to these gangster films, as there was to some

of the ones produced in the 1930s, it could be argued that these films are speaking out against the notion of the self-made man and instead endorsing a new type of masculinity. This new masculinity is one that embraces the idea of group efforts, honest and equal heterosexual relationships. However, this group approach and the notion of the self-made man in regard to questions of masculinity would as Kimmel points out begin to come under fire and was often thought of as a disease, one that was crippling American men by creating patterns of alienation and emptiness (Kimmel, 265).

This belief that masculinity of the 1960s was a diseased one may often be located within the cultural products of the decade, especially the films and television programs. For example, Kimmel notes that “*Star Trek* revealed, perhaps more clearly, if unintentionally, than any other TV show, the growing crisis of masculinity” (290). Another example and one that has been the center of controversy from the moment of its release was the film *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), typically recognized for its influence on the further development of counter culture in America in the late 1960s. As Lester Friedman argues:

the appeal of *Bonnie and Clyde* for its late-sixties audiences seems clear: it fired a subversive shot across the prow of main-stream American society. By doing so, the film forced an older generation of moviemakers, critics, and audiences—one shaped by their Great Depression and World War II experiences—to confront the emerging power and rebellious values of a new and different generation... (4).

The new generation that Friedman identifies thus embraced the film and its ability to anger or inspire American audiences to re-think their own feelings and expectations as Americans, as a nation and the importance of cinema as an art form. William Free echoes Friedman’s assessment of the film in his essay *Aesthetic and Moral Value in Bonnie and Clyde*, noting that “*Bonnie and Clyde* has become the *cause célèbre* of contemporary American film making” (99). In becoming the champion of leftist causes and youth culture, Free argues that “here is an American film which deserves close analysis usually reserved for literary works, more serious drama, and the films of European directors like Bergman, Fellini, and Antonioni” (99). Pauline Kael said of the movie that “*Bonnie and Clyde* is the most excitingly American American movie since the *Manchurian Candidate*” (178).

However, in all the critiques and discussion of the film, ironically gender and in particular masculinity are overlooked. Like the aforementioned *Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* and *Murder Inc.*, this film is deeply invested in examining the gangster and how constructions

of masculinity impact the character as well as the viewer.

The character of Clyde Barrow (Warren Beatty) is based on the real-life petty gangster of the 1930s, yet in the film this lesser known entity becomes a modern day Robin Hood who struggles with his sexual abilities and his need to make a better life for himself and his partner/lover Bonnie Parker (Faye Dunaway). From their first encounter outside Bonnie's house, it is obvious that Clyde is a man of no real worth. The camera shows him attempting to steal Bonnie's mother's car, leading Bonnie to holler down "hey boy!" In this brief exchange director Arthur Penn creates the dynamic of the film, that of questioning and re-thinking American manhood. When Bonnie calls Clyde "boy" she is in a position of power because she is looking down at him from her window and more importantly she denotes that this stranger who looks manly is not acting in ways that respectable men would in the scene. Penn depicts Clyde as a shady character who would steal and yet he is willing to stop when hailed by the voice of a woman. Pierre Bourdieu describes masculinity as "that established order, with its relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices" (1). However, within this film Penn seeks to show that if there is a masculine order of domination at work, it exists within mainstream culture and forces of law and order. This is why I would argue that Clyde already a small time thief takes the opportunity to rob a grocery store using a pistol. These actions demonstrate for Bonnie, who had previously questioned whether he was capable of finding a job, that in fact he is a man of action.

Ironically, it is after this, their first robbery that Bonnie attempts to consummate their relationship through sex. As they drive away, she is shown kissing him and nearly crawling into her lap, a moment in the film that is strangely enough quite touching and comic. Unfortunately for her Clyde is not a man who can perform sexually as he explains to her when he says "look here. I might as well tell you right off. I ain't much of a lover boy. That don't mean nothing personal about you. I mean...I -I-I never saw percentage in it. Ain't nothin' wrong with me...I don't like boys." This exchange between the two challenges the traditional expectations of masculinity that men are always interested in sex, because as Penn shows, it is possible that there are men who are not governed by their sexual desires. It is also interesting that Clyde feels the necessity to state to Bonnie that he is not into "boys" just because he cannot function sexually. The reality that Clyde is not what he appears to be, a virile, good looking man who might possess sexual secrets comes as a great surprise and disappointment to Bonnie. She tells him "your advertising is just dandy. Folks'd just never guess you don't have a thing to sell." Within this

exchange Bonnie's language demonstrates how the idea of sex being a commodity is problematized. In many cases and within Hollywood films, it is usually the women who are sexualized or commodified, yet here Penn emphasizes that Clyde is a man whose masculinity is both questioned and in fact diseased. He is diseased because he buys into the notion of the self-made man, believing that through his criminal exploits he can give Bonnie all the nice things she deserves, thus becoming her source of financial and emotional support. Yet, as Kimmel argues the notion of man as the bread winner was under fire in the 1960s as a result of progressive movements such as civil rights and the burgeoning feminist movement. Many of these elements are incorporated into the film.

When Clyde and Bonnie are finally able to consummate their relationship, it signals the end of their escapades. After escaping the law and being nearly killed they go with C.W. Moss to his father's farm and hide out. While on the farm they rest and try to heal from their wounds. In the process their relationship intensifies to the point when in the scene where the camera shows Bonnie reading the poem she wrote about the two of them to Clyde, he becomes sexually aroused by her. At first this could be read as Clyde simply reacting to the narration of his own exploits; however, Penn's direction and earlier conversations between the two highlight that Clyde is a man who respects women and their abilities, especially Bonnie's. He tells her "you made me somebody" which is an interesting line of dialogue to reflect on when considering the status of Clyde's masculinity. For if American masculinity is defined by men's actions and insecurities, then in this case it becomes apparent that Clyde's are determined by other people's feelings and opinions of him. Thus upon hearing Bonnie's poem, Clyde is able to recognize himself as a person and this is what leads to their sexual union. After finishing the act, Clyde nervously asks Bonnie about his performance and she replies "you did just fine." If it is possible to read their story as a tragic love affair then this moment both highlights and deconstructs the anxieties of this new post-World War II generation.

Clyde is not like Legs Diamond or Abe Reles despite the fact that he makes his way in the world by committing crimes, and this is the subtext of the film. Clyde represents the new men who must come to terms with their own limitations and the erosion of their dominance of the world. The idea of the self-made man must be challenged in this film, just as it is in the end of *Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* and *Murder Inc.* In addition the idea of corporate conformity would have to be challenged if there was to be any hope for real change that accepted the contributions of women and minorities. Together these

three films indicate how questions of masculinity and its importance on the fabric of American society were being interrogated by filmmakers as well as by the culture at large.

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