White Heat (1949)

When White Heat was released in 1949, it was alternately hailed and reviled as a hard-hitting, graphic exercise in brutality. Like other films of the gangster genre, it tapped two sensitive areas of the American psyche: one, the strain of violence which is an integral part of our culture; the other, a curiously ambivalent tendency to admire the successful individual, and yet condemn him for the aggression he employs in his rise to power. White Heat, however, differs from its predecessors in at least one important respect. Unlike the gangster heroes of the thirties, the genius of Cody Jarrett cannot be analyzed wholly in terms of the tooth-and-nail struggle for survival in the underworld of the big city. Jarrett, rather, appears as an anti-hero with several tragic flaws—among them, inherited insanity, a strong Oedipal attachment to his mother, and a susceptibility to severe headaches in moments of stress. It is the combination of these weaknesses with the inherent dangers of gangsterism that leads to his downfall. White Heat, then moves away from purely sociological explanation into the realm of psychological aberration.

The effectiveness of White Heat is due in large part to director Raoul Walsh’s instinctive command of the male action film, as well as his ability to elicit from the tough James Cagney a degree of pathos and vulnerability... [Walsh] keeps his characters away from the center of events, thus increasing their loneliness and emphasizing the feeling of inevitable doom. According to Andrew Sarris, “the Walshian hero is less interested in the how or the why, than in the what.” In White Heat, Cody Jarrett is motivated by the lust for power, excitement and revenge; violent action is the means to success, and inevitably, becomes the content of that success as well...

Walshian themes of anti-trust and anti-fidelity found an ideal outlet in the gangster genre. In White Heat, Jarrett stands as a lonely figure in a hostile world. As a gangster, he operates outside the bounds of ordinary society; the price he pays is unceasing pursuit by the T-Men, who as avenging agents of that society he rejects, are intent on his destruction. Even within his own gang, there is the danger of imminent betrayal; he is isolated from his men by the sadistic brutality, suspicion and fierce instinct for self-preservation through which he maintains his precarious position; ultimately their own lust for power will turn them against him. Jarrett’s isolation is emphasized in the occasional long shot, particularly in the prison sequences: dwarfed by the cold stone walls and humming machinery of the prison shop, Jarrett appears a small man, lost but still feisty in an alien environment. The atmosphere of distrust infects his relationship with his wife as well: there is an undercurrent of brutality and fear even in their most tender moments. In view of Jarrett’s own lack of personal trust or loyalty to anyone but his mother, it is inevitable that he will be betrayed by “Big Ed,” Verna and the others. His fatal mistake is in allowing Fallon to become a surrogate mother and confidant: ironically, it is “misplaced” trust that triggers his downfall.

White Heat’s violent tone is set in the opening sequence with the brutal train murders. As the film progresses, Jarrett’s fiendish delight grows with each successive killing, particularly that of the “friend” he has locked in the trunk of the getaway car. The violent bloodshed is matched by excruciatingly painful fits which he has in moments of severe stress. Visually, shots of violent action are preceded by shots which slowly build tension in anticipation of the event. In the prison dining hall, for example, Cagney’s frenzied rush down the table has twice been anticipated by a slow camera dolly which picks out the faces of the men who are shocked at his sudden flight. In the end, violence, lust for success and insanity converge in the unforgettable image of the gangster standing on the highest tower of a blazing oil refinery... These moments of extreme violence are offset by the quieter sequences in which his relationship with his mother and Fallon are developed. In these passages, the brutality recedes: Jarrett becomes a frightened little boy and a gentle companion. Particularly pathetic is his conversation with Fallon after he has been walking in the dark, communing with his dead mother; that fleeting moment of peace communicates to the viewer Jarrett’s utter vulnerability when his defenses are down, and foreshadows his betrayal. In this sense, White Heat transcends its formula plot and becomes a powerfully shocking yet touching portrayal of a gangster on the way down.

-- Courtenay Beinhorn
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