

# Public Enemies and a pivotal moment in American history

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*Directed by Michael Mann, written by Mann, Ronan Bennett and Ann Biderman, based on the book by Bryan Burrough*

A brief fourteen-month period in 1933-34 witnessed the rise and fall of a group of legendary bank robbers and gangsters in the US—Bonnie and Clyde, Pretty Boy Floyd, Baby Face Nelson, Machine Gun Kelley, Alvin Karpis and the Ma Barker gang, and John Dillinger.

Based on material in Bryan Burrough's *Public Enemies: America's Greatest Crime Wave and the Birth of the FBI, 1933-34*, Michael Mann's new film *Public Enemies* chronicles John Dillinger's spectacular and shortlived crime spree.

Mann's movie begins with Dillinger (Johnny Depp) organizing the break-out of his crew from the Indiana State Prison in September 1933. The surgically performed operation serves notice as to how the director intends to portray Dillinger: an elegant, criminal mastermind whose escapades are almost as ballet-like as they are efficient and effective ... an outlaw respected by his accomplices and cheered on by the public for being fair-minded to the little people and a thorn in the side of the banks and the establishment.

Depp as Dillinger is seductive, whether he's dodging FBI gunfire, ministering to his bullet-ridden accomplices, or winning the heart of the woman of his dreams. He is a man who seems to defy physical limitations, leaping over bank counters and breaching police lines with blazing guns.

At first, Dillinger runs circles around the authorities, but J. Edgar Hoover (Billy Crudup) and the fledgling FBI respond to the threat. (In his book, Burrough writes: "Before Hoover, American law enforcement was a decentralized polyglot of county sheriffs and urban police departments too often crippled by corruption ... Hoover's power did not evolve slowly. It erupted during the Great Crime Wave of 1933-34.") Mann makes clear that Hoover, who disdains democratic norms and rules by fiat, is centralizing law enforcement, building an army of fedora-sporting, trench coat-wearing young white males with law degrees.

To capture the elusive Dillinger, Hoover appoints Melvin Purvis (Christian Bale) as the head of the squad. Purvis is smart and single-minded, qualities needed to outwit a wily and popular offender. Dillinger's concern for the common man is on display during one robbery, when a bank customer forgets his cash on the counter. "You go ahead and take your money. We don't want your money. Just the bank's," says Dillinger kindly, in the middle of a war zone.

In Mann's film, the bank robber and his gang mates—who include John "Red" Hamilton (Jason Clarke), Homer Van Meter (Stephen Dorff) and Charles Makley (Christian Stolte)—are out to get rich by stealing from the rich. Dillinger makes a social statement when he dines with hatcheck girl Billie Frechette (Marion Cotillard) at an upscale restaurant. The bank robber stares down the wealthy patrons who disapprove of Billie's three-dollar dress.

Dillinger and Billie—she is not only poor, but also part American Indian, which brands her as an outcast—form an intense bond. But soon the cocky

Dillinger is again behind bars, requiring another daring and ingenious escape from Lake County Jail in Crown Point, Indiana, in March 1934.

In a further embarrassment for Purvis, Dillinger survives an FBI ambush while hiding out with Baby Face Nelson (Stephen Graham) at the Little Bohemia travel lodge in northern Wisconsin in April 1934. But times are changing and so is Dillinger's luck. One of the most intelligent of the Crime Wave hoodlums is Alvin Karpis (Giovanni Ribisi), who warns Dillinger that organized crime, engaged in lucrative bookmaking operations and other activities, is losing patience with the more primitive and conspicuous robbery gangs.

Billie is subsequently captured and arrested—and beaten. A trap is set by the FBI with the help of Anna Sage (the infamous "Lady in Red"), a brothel madam and eastern European immigrant, in trouble with the federal immigration department. A postscript reveals that Melvin Purvis resigned from the FBI in 1935 and committed suicide in 1960.

*Public Enemies* covers an intriguing moment in American history, and one with all sorts of implications, some of which Michael Mann seems alive to, but the artistic treatment is essentially quite weak. The filmmakers squander far too many opportunities for shedding light on people and social life, and instead pursue less interesting, more conventional paths.

The great love story tossed into the middle of the film and served up Harlequin Romance-style, between Dillinger and Frechette, is something of a travesty. Depp and Cotillard strive valiantly to remain in high gear throughout, but the silliness of the relationship defeats them. Absurdly, although Dillinger more or less bullies Frechette into the relationship, it turns out to be something of an exemplary one, with the gangster all charm and sensitivity—in the midst of a nationwide search for America's number one "public enemy." It doesn't ring true at all.

A good deal of the film's dialogue is virtually inaudible, and too much of the rest is both pedestrian and overblown. Extended scenes of robberies and gunfire, or police activities, are intercut with brief chunks of conversation, between Dillinger and Billie, or Dillinger and the gang members. These short sequences are obliged to carry far too much weight, and they fail badly.

So we get Dillinger to Billie, "I like baseball, movies, good clothes, fast cars. What else do you need to know?" Or the bank robber facing an FBI manhunt, "We're having too much fun to think about tomorrow," or one of his cohorts, facing death, instructing Dillinger "to let go."

The ongoing absence among American filmmakers of a strong historical sense remains a major problem. To the extent that the characters are not genuinely made "of their time," the filmmakers resort to trite solutions and shortcuts. Burrough's book makes clear that Dillinger and Frechette were seriously damaged people, twisted by a harsh and brutal social environment.

There is simply not much time or energy given over to convincing human interaction in *Public Enemies*. Hollywood's gangster films of the 1930s and 1940s painted more three-dimensional pictures of the times and

personalities. Even more recent film, such as Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) or Robert Altman's *Thieves Like Us* (1974), catch the imagination in more developed ways. These films portray their protagonists, without prettifying them, as the victims of poverty and neglect—unconscious and overwhelmed pursuers of a version of the American Dream.

Dillinger was something of an exception in this regard. The son of a wealthy Indianapolis grocer and real estate investor, the young man's life changed dramatically when he was jailed for a "jaw-dropping" nine years at the age of 21 for a failed mugging. The American "justice" system, more than anything, produced Dillinger's criminal career.

Burrough quotes Purvis's secretary Doris Rogers: "These women [like Billie Frechette] were such pities. Everybody was broke, and they were running with these men because they couldn't get a meal. They all had a baby or two, and they were treated like dirt. I tell you, the Depression was a terrible time in America."

The strongest element in *Public Enemies* is the treatment of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. Here Mann takes considerable historical care and also lets loose with some genuine vitriol. One feels through much of the film that the FBI is a band of thugs and even murderers, presided over by a quasi-fascist.

Crudup as Hoover is chilling in an understated, disturbing fashion. At one juncture, the agency director, with a fierce grimace, tells Purvis, "Suspects are to be interrogated 'vigorously.' Grilled. No obsolete notions of sentimentality. We are in the modern age and we are making modern history. Take direct, expedient action. As they say in Italy these days, 'Take off the white gloves.'" Mussolini—and Donald Rumsfeld—come to mind.

Clearly, and it is fully to their credit, Mann and his screenwriters intend scenes of FBI wire-tapping, trampling on elementary rights, the abuse and even torture of prisoners to resonate with contemporary audiences—and they do.

Moreover, the current economic breakdown must have had some impact on the film's writing and production. Mann and the others are aware that once again banks are hated institutions. (Reportedly, in April 1934 moviegoers across the country wildly cheered newsreel footage of Dillinger, the bank robber on the loose, while images of FBI agents were booed.)

Unfortunately, Mann and his writers too often take the line of least resistance. Having their villain, Hoover, they feel obliged to transform Dillinger into a hero. Why not portray people more objectively, truthfully? A much richer reality would emerge. Hoover was a major criminal, but Dillinger was a sociopath, who doesn't necessarily deserve our sympathy, except possibly in the broadest sense. There is no need to set up lopsided equations to make a point.

In an interview with the *Guardian*, Mann makes an interesting comment: "Dillinger at one point was the second most popular man in America after President Roosevelt. And he was a national hero for a good reason. He was robbing the very institutions, the banks, which had afflicted the people for four years, and after four years nothing was getting any better. You're in the depths of the Great Depression in 1933 and when the authorities came after him—these were the same authorities that couldn't fix anything. They also couldn't remedy the misery of people out of work, or made homeless, or made into orphans by the Dustbowl. They couldn't do anything right, and they also couldn't catch John Dillinger. And he had a wicked sense of humor and really knew how to use the press. He was outrageous and funny, so you bet he was a hero."

Unfortunately, these connections are not adequately developed in the film itself.

The content of the Depression conditions is minimally treated, reduced to the image of a dingy farmhouse or a fleeting reference on a radio broadcast to "red" influence in a miners' strike. These touches are used

more as bits of color, rather than a means of illuminating and even driving the drama.

What's missing in *Public Enemies* is a deeper understanding of the processes at work. While the authorities genuinely wanted to wipe out Dillinger and the other gangsters, the banking business already had its share of problems, the "crime spree" was *relatively* easily put down. The "war on crime" provided Hoover and the FBI with the pretext for developing a national police force and introducing more systematic methods of repression. A ferocious anti-communist, Hoover was above all worried about the impact of the Depression and the discrediting of capitalism on the broad mass of the people.

Significantly, Hoover's career in the Justice Department began in 1917—the year of the Russian Revolution. By 1919, as Burrough writes, "[H]e was named head of the General Intelligence Division, a newly created bureau charged with prosecuting labor radicals, anarchists, and Communists. He earned high marks—and his first interview in the *New York Times*—as a driving force behind the department's January 1920 raids on Communists in 33 cities, which led to the arrest of more than three thousand people."

In 1933 and the first half of 1934, the period of "America's Greatest Crime Wave," the population was still stunned by the new economic conditions. To a certain extent, individual acts of violence and disorientation predominated. Dillinger and the others filled the headlines, their activities greeted with probably differing degrees of sympathy by a still largely passive working population.

It has to be noted as a matter of historical fact, however, that once the working class began to articulate in action its own social interests in 1934 (the mass struggles in Toledo, San Francisco, Minneapolis, later Flint, Michigan, and beyond) the social atmosphere changed radically. One has difficulty imagining the activities of Dillinger, or Bonnie and Clyde, or Baby Face Nelson, coinciding with general strikes and factory occupations, not merely because the lawbreakers had been exterminated by the authorities, but because by then a different atmosphere had developed, with a different disposition of social forces.

There is a certain irony that *Public Enemies*, reflecting these processes only faintly and indistinctly and, unhappily, missing the principal social dynamic, should appear in movie theaters during another lull before the storm, so to speak.

Mann is to be credited for a sensitivity and an intuition about big questions, but, aside from *The Insider*, he hasn't indicated he can do enough with them.



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