

The Town: Clichés and engaging performances

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Directed by Ben Affleck, co-written by Affleck, Peter Craig and Aaron Stockard, based on Chuck Hogan's novel Prince of Thieves

The Town is well-known actor Ben Affleck's second shot at directing a feature film. His film *Gone Baby Gone* (2007) was likewise a crime thriller set in a working class area of Boston, Massachusetts.

Part of a growing sub-genre of films, including *Mystic River* (2003), directed by Clint Eastwood, and *The Departed*, directed by Martin Scorsese and starring Affleck's long-time friend and acting partner Matt Damon, *The Town* tries to communicate something about the general conditions of life in America while remaining action-packed entertainment. It is more successful at doing the latter than the former.

As the film opens, we are told "there are over 300 bank robberies in Boston every year. Most of these professionals live in a 1-square-mile neighborhood called Charlestown." That one working class neighborhood might have the dubious honor of producing so many accomplished thieves served as the starting-point for Affleck's film, through which he might have tackled the complex question of the relation between lack of education and unemployment, social decay and the resort to petty (and not so petty) crime—as well as the class tensions set off by gentrification of this historically Irish-American ghetto, or another one.

A daring broad-daylight bank robbery in Harvard Square is pulled off with great expertise by a group of childhood buddies, headed by Doug MacRay (Affleck) and James "Jem" Coughlin (Jeremy Renner). They make off with the loot, but also end up taking a

hostage, the bank manager Claire Keesey (Rebecca Hall). She is released unharmed, but when the gang discovers that she is a "Tuney" (yuppie) who has moved into their neighborhood and might recognize them on the street, complications develop.

Since MacRay had the closest contact with Claire during the heist (calming her so she can dial the combination to the bank vault by saying "Just remember, it's not your money"), he takes on the task of keeping an eye on her. After an encounter at the laundromat, where she reveals herself to be still shaken by her recent experience, he asks her out on a date, in the course of which he learns that she has already been questioned by FBI agent Adam Trawley (Jon Hamm, known to viewers as Don Draper in the popular AMC series *Mad Men*).

Claire also reveals that she saw an identifying tattoo on one of the robbers, which MacRay persuades her not to tell Trawley about for the time being. When she says he seems surprisingly familiar with the ways of law enforcement, he jokes that he gets it all from watching TV shows like *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. Indeed, *The Town* often feels like a segment in a television series, and in fact such series as HBO's *The Wire* cover much of the same ground, and in greater depth.

Agent Trawley and his team learn that MacRay and his gang are working for an Irish mobster, Fergie the Florist (Pete Postlewaite), who also "employed" MacRay's father (Chris Cooper), now shut away for life in a federal prison. MacRay's growing romantic involvement with Claire and desire to leave behind his life of crime (and his Oxycontin-addicted ex-girlfriend Krista [Blake Lively]) predictably cause tension with

his buddy Jem, raise questions of his “loyalty” to his family and his class, and end in more robberies and gun-blazing car chases.

The clichés and stereotypes are pervasive. At best they are offset by relatively engaging performances, particularly by Renner and Lively in secondary roles, as well as Postlewaite’s pock-marked mobster. It would seem that having created such overwhelmingly negative characters in *Gone Baby Gone*, Affleck has gone to the opposite extreme here.

To the extent the film is enjoyable, it is primarily for its unabashed “cops-and-robbers” style. Our sympathy is on the side of the small band of “townies” who remarkably never really hurt anyone, and unlike *CSI* and *The Wire*, the cops do not win here, despite the overwhelming force at their disposal. Affleck clearly wants to underscore this point as the Boston police force is augmented with ever growing numbers of FBI squadrons, SWAT teams, commando units, sniffer-dogs, helicopters, and all manner of high-powered weaponry, all to no avail.

This gives the film an anti-establishment edge, suggesting comparison to other bank robber films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (directed by Arthur Penn, 1967) or *Dog Day Afternoon* (directed by Sidney Lumet, 1975). But *The Town* is incapable of capturing in a dramatically convincing way the intense social tensions at work today that lie behind the desperate attempts to strike back at the system, despite an almost certain end in tragic and violent death.

The only darker note hinted at in this world where everything is pretty much on the surface, or easily discovered, and everyone is who they appear to be (and wearing clearly labeled wind-breakers), is that the robbers are able to outwit the forces of a repressive state by “passing” as utility workers, EMT technicians, bus drivers, even as cops, because they *are* these workers, they do these jobs and wear these uniforms. And there is an unmistakable anxiety that through their knowledge of this infrastructure, the working class might just pull off more than a bank job.



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