

Filmmaking and social life in postwar America

The Crime Films of Anthony Mann: A comment and a conversation with the author—Part 1

David Walsh
18 December 2013

This is the first part of a two-part article.

The Crime Films of Anthony Mann, by Max Alvarez, University Press of Mississippi, 2013.

The career of American filmmaker Anthony Mann (1906-1967) lasted from the early 1940s to the late 1960s. To a certain degree, his overall trajectory mirrored that of Hollywood filmmaking as a whole: he began with crime dramas and *film noir* in the 1940s, shifted to making mostly westerns in the 1950s and turned to “epics” in the early 1960s.

Mann remains a largely undervalued director. The greatest critical attention to his work, by far, has been paid to the series of remarkable westerns he made with James Stewart— *Winchester '73* (1950), *Bend of the River* (1952), *The Naked Spur* (1953), *The Far Country* (1954) and *The Man from Laramie* (1955). These films, with their scenes of considerable emotional tension and intensity, prompted critic Andrew Sarris to refer to “their insights into the uneasy relationships between men and women in a world of violence and action.”

Watching those films today, it is difficult not to conclude that their moral and psychological drama had a good deal more to do with the traumas of the mid-20th century than with the trials and tribulations of fictional adventurers and lawmen in the 1880s and 1890s. This is perhaps Mann’s most mature body of work, but it came under circumstances in the Cold War era that made it problematic for filmmakers to take an overtly critical look at contemporary social life in the US. This is an issue referred to in the discussion below with Max Alvarez, author of the newly published *The Crime Films of Anthony Mann*.

Alvarez notes in his Introduction that “Mann’s international reputation is based on [his] pensive and intense westerns” and documents the director’s own negative view of the low-budget films he made, sometimes for “Poverty Row” studios, in the 1940s and early 1950s. Alvarez adds, however, “Clearly I do not share Mann’s disdain for most of his monochromatic crime melodramas; rather, I believe they are no less worthy of serious study than *The Naked Spur* or *Men in War* [Mann’s film about the Korean War, released in 1957].”

After viewing, or re-viewing, a good number of the films treated in the new book, I am inclined to agree. In fact, I would go so far as to say that Mann’s most intense and socially revealing moments come in the earlier films, as uneven and unsatisfying as some of the works are in their entirety. I think there is a degree of concrete, urgent insight and feeling in *The Great Flamarion* (1945), *Desperate* (1947), *T-Men* (1947), *Raw Deal* (1948) and *Side Street* (1950), for example, that is perhaps unmatched later on in his career.

One of Alvarez’ first tasks in his well-researched book is to clear up the “haziness and mystery” that shrouds Anthony Mann’s life and career.

Alvarez establishes that Emile Anton Bundsmann, the future film director, was born June 30, 1906 in “Lomaland, a Theosophical commune founded in 1900 in Point Loma, near San Diego in Southern California.” Theosophy, identified in particular with Russian-born occultist Helena Blavatsky, was a mystical creed, which, like a number of others that emerged in the late 19th century in the wake of Darwin’s discoveries, attempted to reconcile religion and science.

In an odd twist of fate, Bundsmann was essentially “left behind at the commune from the age of three until he was thirteen” after the boy’s father became ill and his mother accompanied her husband to his native Austria where the latter convalesced. Eventually, in 1920, his mother collected her son from Lomaland and took him back to New Jersey, where she had moved to live with her sister.

Emile Anton Bundsmann performed as an actor in New York in the mid- and late 1920s, Alvarez explains, before beginning to work as a stage director in 1933. He found employment at a unit of the Federal Theater Project (FTP), part of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA). Alvarez notes that “The risk-taking FTP enterprise embraced left-wing social themes, producing plays challenging fascism, racism, and capitalism, eventually facing right-wing attacks in Washington, D.C.”

Alvarez writes, “What were Bundsmann’s politics in 1936 and subsequent years? Having spent over a decade in the New York theater, he naturally affiliated with left-wing artists, but he did not join any radical political organizations. Bundsmann’s theater work nonetheless exhibits a concern for urgent political issues and sympathy for the disenfranchised. Throughout his Hollywood career during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the director crossed paths with leftist artists, many of whom were future or past blacklisted.”

In 1939, the new book recounts, Bundsmann “found a yearlong assignment in the embryonic field of television. This facet of Mann’s background, so vital to our comprehension of his subsequent motion picture career, has until now either barely been acknowledged or completely ignored. ... Anton Bundsmann was among the very first television directors in the world.”

Two years later, following his mother’s death, Bundsmann drove to California with two friends, where he “sought to reinvent himself,” directing his first film for Paramount, *Dr. Broadway*, a mystery-comedy, in 1942 as Anthony Mann.

Alvarez devotes chapters to each of the thirteen “crime films” that Mann directed between 1942 and 1951, to *Follow Me Quietly* (Richard Fleischer, 1949), a film he co-wrote, and to *Load*, a “*film noir* short” cut from an MGM omnibus film, *It’s a Big Country: An American Anthology*

prior to its release in 1951.

In regard to each of the crime dramas, the author discusses in meticulous detail the process of its writing (including, wherever possible, the various drafts), production and “selling.” A picture of the movie business in the 1940s emerges, with its numerous contradictions.

In his chapter on *Raw Deal*, for example, Alvarez asserts: “If ever a case could be made for the viability of creating cinematic art from an artistically bankrupt literary source, *Raw Deal* would be it. The story of this Anthony Mann triumph begins with *Corkscrew Alley*, a virtually unreadable sixty-two-page film treatment by Arnold B. Armstrong and Audrey Ashley.”

He goes on: “In December 1946, Eagle-Lion purchased the treatment for \$1,250 (roughly \$15,000 in 2013) as a Richard Basehart vehicle with *Railroaded!* producer Charles F. Riesner, a former comedy director whose credentials included Buster Keaton’s *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928), attached. After *T-Men* producer Edward Small took over the property, the plotline was discarded, with only the film’s temporary title and villain’s name retained, as well as its promotion as the ‘story of a chain gang.’”

Alvarez concludes, “One thing is indisputable: the screenplay that became *Raw Deal* was unrecognizable from the *Corkscrew Alley* treatment. Gone were characters named Bitsy and Lady. Gone were the Santa Claus Bandits. What emerged was a harshly poetic and tragic love triangle between a doomed escaped con and two very different, needy women. Under Anthony Mann’s direction and [cinematographer] John Alton’s often astonishing images, the screenplay reached the screen as a bleak, woeful, fiercely beautiful cry of *film noir* despair. That it reached the screen at all is a considerable achievement.”

In addition to studio interference and sometimes outright stupidity, Hollywood filmmakers confronted the American censors. Anyone who dreams that the US is or has ever been part of some mythical “free world” would do well to read *The Crime Films of Anthony Mann*. Alvarez details in regard to each of Mann’s films the innumerable objections raised and changes demanded (and generally obtained) by “Joseph I. Breen’s Production Code Administration [PCA], a studio-controlled entity whose job was to rigidly enforce the nineteenth-century values of its chief Catholic censor and that of the Code itself.”

Alvarez explains that “Breen organized the PCA in mid-1934 to serve as an enforcer of the 1930 Motion Picture Production Code of Ethics, which the censor and such reactionary groups as the Catholic Legion of Decency felt the Hollywood studios were virtually ignoring. Beginning in 1934, Breen and his office became involved in censoring projects starting at the screenwriting level, demanding approval of all scripts before any film stock could be exposed. The completed pictures then needed PCA blessings before being distributed, but even these Breen-approved productions faced challenges from city and state censorship boards as well as those of other countries.”

The timing is significant. A far stricter censorship was descending as the mass response to the hardships and suffering of the Great Depression erupted in major strikes, including citywide general strikes, in 1934. Breen and his fellow censors insisted on the excision of social criticism, including unfavorable depictions of police, government officials and clergy.

The demands of Breen’s office were as breathtakingly sweeping as they were reactionary. Supplied a copy of the screenplay for Mann’s *Desperate* in 1946, Breen wrote to RKO: “We regret to say that in its present form, this basic story is not acceptable under the requirements of the Production Code, for the reason that, aided and abetted by a police officer, your sympathetic lead, Steve, takes the law into his own hands and kills Radak [a gangster]. Further, the police officer sends Steve off scot free [sic], with no suggestion whatever of due process of law. Before the basic story could be approved, it will be necessary to rewrite completely this unacceptable ending.”

In March 1947, Breen also found ~~the~~ *Railroaded!* screenplay for a man framed up for a murder, “unacceptable,” although it was based on an actual case. Alvarez explains: “Breen was alarmed that ‘the administration of justice in contemporary American life is shown to be ineffective’ and that a district attorney, a drunken lawyer, police officers, and detectives were being presented unsympathetically.” Later, “Breen Sr. reminded an E-L [Eagle-Lion Films] executive ‘that all police shown in this story should be presented favorably’”!

Later in 1947, the screenplay for the aforementioned *Raw Deal* was deemed by Breen, in a letter, “completely and utterly unacceptable under the provisions of the Production Code, and a motion picture developed from this screenplay could not be approved by us. The unacceptability of this story stems from its overall low moral tone. It is a sordid story of crime, immorality, brutality, gruesomeness, illicit sex and sex perversion, without the slightest suggestion of any compensating moral values whatsoever.” Somehow or other, the remarkable film was made anyway.

Mann’s themes

In 1963, during Mann’s epic-making phase (he was the original director on *Spartacus* [1960] before a disagreement with Kirk Douglas, and then directed *El Cid* [1961] and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* [1964]), Andrew Sarris complained that the filmmaker had become “a style without a theme.” Five years later, Sarris amended that by adding the comment noted above, about Mann’s treatment in his earlier films of the “uneasy relationships between men and women in a world of violence and action.”

Critic Manny Farber, a keen admirer of the director, could not resist a joke about “Anthony Mann’s inhumanity to man.” The films of “this tin-can de Sade,” Farber wrote, display “an original dictionary of ways in which to punish the human body. Mann has done interesting work with scissors, a cigarette lighter, and steam,” along with “the horns of a stuffed deer stuck on the wall.”

Of course, Mann didn’t invent that particular dictionary, fascism and authoritarian regimes had provided many of the entries. The filmmaker’s central European heritage—his father was an Austrian Catholic academic and his mother came from a Bavarian-Jewish family—is not incidental in this regard.

Mann brought a cultural seriousness to bear on his filmmaking, although sometimes on unworthy projects. As Alvarez remarks, “Not many Hollywood directors could boast, as Mann did in the 1960s, that he had seen ‘nearly all of Shakespeare’s plays,’ including approximately fifteen stage versions of *Hamlet*.” In 1964, Mann wrote: “I believe in the nobility of the human spirit. It is that for which I look in a subject I am to direct. I do not believe that everybody is bad, that the whole world is wrong. The greatness of Shakespeare’s plays is the nobility of the human spirit, even though he may destroy the character.”

Like a number of the intriguing film directors of the period, if not those working at the very highest artistic level, Mann tended to take the brutal character of his epoch for granted and devoted much of his effort to considering how an “ordinary” human being navigated the pressures and dilemmas of such a volatile and even murderous epoch. His characters generally face a ruthless, tyrannical figure or organization and struggle to survive, for the most part individually, while maintaining a semblance of principle and dignity.

This is the situation facing Steve Randall in *Desperate*, Rosie and Steve Ryan in *Railroaded!*, Dennis O’Keefe’s characters in *T-Men* and *Raw Deal*, even Roy Morgan in *He Walked by Night* (with whom, although he is a criminal, we sympathize), Pablo Rodriguez and Jack Bearnes in

Border Incident and Joe Norson in *Side Street* .

The “darkness” of certain American films in the late 1940s has at least two principal sources: on the one hand, these films were made in the shadow of fascism, the imperialist war and the Nazi crimes, events that inevitably colored the work of any thinking and sensitive artist; on the other hand, the “darkness” increasingly reflected a foreboding about the course that postwar American life was taking. Whatever illusions existed that America was growing in a popular-socialist direction, illusions encouraged by the Communist Party and its milieu, were shattered by Hiroshima, the national security state and the anti-communist hysteria.

Filmmakers at the time were not unaware of the fact that reactionary social elements were not something unique to Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Wealthy, right-wing, unscrupulous figures and forces in postwar America came increasingly into the spotlight, in films by Orson Welles, Max Ophuls, Edgar Ulmer, Michael Curtiz, Abraham Polonsky and John Huston, among others. The Hollywood blacklist came as a response to this socially critical trend, within which, generally speaking, Anthony Mann worked.

An interview with Max Alvarez

I recently spoke to author Max Alvarez in New York City.

David Walsh: Could you explain how you developed a special interest in Anthony Mann?

Max Alvarez: I always have been a huge admirer of his work and the consistent quality of the work he did. Age seven, Tower Theater, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, my parents took me to a third- or, who knows, eighth-run screening of *God's Little Acre* [1958]. This is already nine years after the film was made. I didn't know who Anthony Mann was, but I remember the film very vividly. I remember when his last film, *A Dandy in Aspic* [1968], was broadcast on network television.

Mann is this influence in the background ... hearing about him, reading about him, not seeing a lot of his non-westerns. Later, with home video we could see the other films. I have to be honest with you, I entered into this project with a certain naïveté. I thought I would like to do a very simple book. I would cover Anthony Mann's crime films, one film per chapter, perhaps half a page on his background, and that would be it.

I didn't realize until I began how mysterious this man was, how little we knew about him ... and what had been written about him in this country was mostly wrong. So then it became this mini-biography. And then in looking at and studying the films, we realize how truly complex they are.

DW: What do you think concerned Mann? What were his central themes?

MA: I would say what drove Mann were concerns for the human condition. I think he was very sympathetic to the human situation. I think that he believed it was important to show human beings in all their strengths and weaknesses, that he didn't really like one-dimensional portrayals of people, regardless of what terrible acts they'd committed.

I think if one tried to pin him down, he would be a little cagey on where he stood on various issues, but if you study his works, you see there are a lot of concerns there, whether it's bigotry or injustice ... I think he has a sense of compassion for humanity, which surfaces in very intense and violent situations. His violence, compared to what we see today, is not done for enjoyment. It's the culmination of conditions and events in the narrative. It's a last resort that provides very little pleasure for anyone involved.

DW: Mann lived through violent events. It would be hard to abstract violence from the 20th century.

MA: Precisely. And filmmakers of his generation, Otto Preminger,

Samuel Fuller, Joseph H. Lewis, granted that the Production Code had to keep things in check with regard to violence, all were affected by these world conditions, the wars, fascism, the Holocaust. That does surface. Their approach to the material is going to be influenced by what they saw, what they heard about. They weren't as insulated as contemporary film directors.

In Anthony Mann's case, he was coming out of a very intellectual background, or, shall we say, he came of age in the New York theater world in the 1920s and 1930s. A generally left-wing world.

The changing of his professional name in 1941 (although he never changed it legally), from Emile Anton Bundsmann to Anthony Mann, had something to do obviously with the German word “Bund,” which would not have been popular at the time. But it was also a tidy way of separating his new film career from his years in the New York theater and the Federal Theatre Project in the 1930s. So that may tell us something about his caution.

He was not resistant to dealing with subjects of a radical bent. We see this in some of his television work: for example, the Sidney Howard play [*Ode to Liberty*, 1940], about a bourgeois woman who shields a Communist from the police and doesn't convert him, and gives the Communist salute at the end. He was comfortable with all sorts of ideologies.

Norma Barzman, the wife of the blacklisted writer Ben Barzman, described him to me as “a good liberal.” She said that he and they never disagreed on the issues of the day, and this was the time of the Vietnam War. And the fact that he was sympathetic to her blacklisted husband's situation, providing him with consistent writing work, indicates that he didn't approve of what was going on in the industry, the blacklist and so on. But I don't think we can overstate the fear that people had about speaking publicly about that.

Also, one element of Hollywood studio filmmaking is that directors had to be political and artistic chameleons. One week you might be directing a western, where the Indians are the bad guys, and the next week you might be directing a film where the Indians are sympathetic. I find it fascinating how a director could put his own thoughts on hold to do that job.

DW: Let's discuss the various films. I was not able to see two early films, *Dr. Broadway* [1942] or *Two O'Clock Courage* [1945].

[Mann's first feature film, *Dr. Broadway*, takes place over the course of 24 hours and follows the “agreeably exaggerated” activities of Dr. Timothy Kane (Macdonald Carey), “whose adoptive family, a likable gang of Times Square hooligans, took him in as a boy after the death of his father,” writes Alvarez. At the center of the plot is the effort by a dying gangster (Eduardo Ciannelli) to locate his daughter.]

[A female cab driver, Patty (Ann Rutherford), comes across a man (Tom Conway) who claims to have amnesia in *Two O'Clock Courage*. The pair soon learn that he fits the description of a murder suspect. Convinced of his innocence, “Patty is determined to clear him and assist in uncovering his true identity. The Man and Patty spend a long night together in apartments, nightclubs, mansions, and ‘Harry,’ Patty's taxi, unraveling a labyrinthine plot.”]

MA: *Dr. Broadway* is a pleasant surprise, and I'm certainly hoping that they issue it to DVD soon. It pretty much dispels any theories that Anthony Mann had to learn how to be a director by working on what we call “Poverty Row,” low-budget films at Republic Pictures. With *Dr. Broadway*, he is already in full command of the medium. He had a bigger budget at Paramount. It was a B movie [1], but it had great production values, and it was very competently directed.

The interesting thing about *Dr. Broadway* is that some critics at the time complained that it had an inconsistent feel to it. They objected to the element of comic relief. What they were essentially crying out for was *film noir* .

There was a trend in the late 1930s and early 1940s of mysteries with

comic elements, and most of them were not very artistically successful. An exception perhaps is *Stranger on the Third Floor*, with Peter Lorre [1940, Boris Ingster], which is considered one of the first examples of American film noir.

And *Two O'Clock Courage* was an assignment that RKO gave Mann, it's a remake of a film from the late 1930s, and it has a lot of comedy.

DW: Mann obviously was a thoughtful, artistically sensitive man. I watched *Strangers in the Night* [1944], which is an odd little film. But there is clearly an intelligence at work. You do see some B pictures that are simply hopeless, incompetently made.

[In *Strangers in the Night*, a discharged US marine (William Terry) searches for the woman, Rosemary, with whom he corresponded during the war. As Alvarez explains, he travels to California "to meet Hilda (Helene Thimig), Rosemary's elderly mother, who assures him that her absent daughter will be returning soon to meet him. As the days pass, the veteran suspects that something is amiss and that Hilda and her repressed female friend Ivy (Edith Barrett) are concealing secrets."]

MA: That was the hardest film to trace. It played a few days in Chicago, a few days in Brooklyn, then in the suburbs of Los Angeles, finally downtown Los Angeles. We wonder why B pictures were made, in some cases. But they often made their costs back and more over time.

DW: I thought *The Great Flamarion* [1945], I don't care what anybody says, is an extraordinary film.

[Erich von Stroheim, in *The Great Flamarion*, plays "an aging, arrogant vaudeville sharpshooter who falls in love with sexy deceiver Connie [Mary Beth Hughes], the woman who, along with her worthless alcoholic husband Al [Dan Duryea], is part of the marksman's stage act." She manipulates Flamarion "into 'accidentally' shooting Al during a performance. Connie eventually double-crosses Flamarion, thus ushering in the sharpshooter's descent into personal and professional ruin."]

MA: Thank you! I thought I was crazy. I love that film.

DW: I thought Erich von Stroheim was wonderful.

MA: I felt that the more the film played out, the better he was, the more devastating his situation was, this aging performer in love with a younger woman who plays him for a fool. I thought Mary Beth Hughes' performance was marvelous. I thought the two of them were extremely complicated main characters.

When I was putting the research together on these films I literally transcribed every film. I wrote down what the camera was doing, what the characters were saying in most situations, and *Flamarion* was one of the most difficult films to transcribe, because the emotions that are going back and forth between these two characters were so dramatic.

DW: That opening sequence in the theater, or music hall, in Mexico City, as you described, is fabulous. The sense of the theater, the crowd, the performers on stage ... it's breathtaking.

MA: It is breathtaking. There seemed to be in the studio system—because directors were so beholden to producers and the front office—the attitude, 'Let the director do some showy scene, let him get it out of his system, and then he'll do things the way we want.' So you do have a number of films of the 1930s and even the silent years in which there is a showcase scene, and you can tell the studio didn't tamper with it. And *Flamarion* has such a scene in the beginning.

The scene in the hotel room, when Flamarion/von Stroheim is waiting, vainly, for the girl, and dancing by himself, is remarkable. Audiences in 1945 were apparently made a little bit uncomfortable by that, there was some tittering. That's when you see von Stroheim coming through, and you realize that it's not a one-dimensional performance.

DW: I haven't seen *Strange Impersonation* [1946] recently. I was very struck by Brenda Marshall as the scientist whose face is disfigured, and the overall emotional intensity of it.

[In *Strange Impersonation*, the jealous assistant of chemist Nora Goodrich (Brenda Marshall) arranges an explosion that disfigures the latter's face. Meanwhile, a woman the scientist bumped into with her car is trying to blackmail her. When the extortionist falls from Nora's apartment, her face is made unrecognizable, "so Nora assumes the dead woman's identity and heads west for plastic surgery to alter her original appearance."]

MA: Another tremendous performance. By remarkable coincidence or not, we see some extremely interesting female characters in Mann's early films. Here we see Brenda Marshall, William Holden's wife at the time, as a scientist; Ann Rutherford in *Two O'Clock Courage* is a taxi driver; Virginia Grey plays a doctor in *Strangers in the Night*. Granted it's wartime, and you have more women in those occupations, but Mann did some very compelling takes on women's situations—even Claire Trevor in *Raw Deal* [1948].

The role Brenda Marshall plays in *Strange Impersonation*, Nora Goodrich, a chemist, is quite complex, fascinating. The psychological mind-games going on in that film are compelling. In addition to having her face disfigured, as the result of her scheming assistant, Nora bumps into a woman with her car, and the woman later tries to extort money out of her, and a fight occurs. The woman falls from the building, lands on her face and is unrecognizable, and then Marshall's character assumes her identity! I'm sure Anthony Mann was just shaking his head—how can I make this ridiculousness work? But he did! A disturbing little film.

[1] A "B movie" was a low-budget film originally so called because it filled out the bottom, or least prestigious, half of a double feature.

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)