

Filmmaking and social life in postwar America

The Crime Films of Anthony Mann: A comment and a conversation with the author—Part 2

David Walsh

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

Anthony Mann was a significant filmmaker of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. We continue today an interview with Max Alvarez, author of *The Crime Films of Anthony Mann*. Part 1 was posted yesterday.

David Walsh: In Anthony Mann's *Desperate* [1947], I have to admit the scenes with Raymond Burr as the villainous gangster are the ones that I remember most. Steve Brodie tries hard, as the innocent young guy, but I don't find him that appealing.

[Truck driver Steve Randall (Steve Brodie) is conned by gangster Walter Radak (Raymond Burr) in *Desperate* into assisting on what turns out to be a robbery. "Steve alerts a policeman and attempts to flee the crime scene...but Walt's younger brother Al shoots a cop and gets arrested." The gang threatens Steve's wife until he agrees to confess to the shooting. The couple then go on the run. Once the policeman dies and Al faces the electric chair, "Walt goes on a hunt for Steve, first to force him into fulfilling his obligations, then, when it is too late to save Al, to avenge his brother's execution."]

Max Alvarez: Those scenes are the best. Burr specialized in playing a villain in that period, before his *Perry Mason* days on television. The scenes in *Desperate* you're referring to take place in the gangster's hideout. The swinging light during an off-screen beating is memorable. The censors, as I mention, had a great deal of trouble with the level of violence during that scene, even though it was only suggested. They tried to stop the use of a broken bottle.

But those scenes are superbly lighted, and indicate that Mann had a full command of the creation of tension through lighting, even before his affiliation with famed cinematographer John Alton. *T-Men* [1947] is where that alliance started. *Desperate* was the first Mann film based on material he was responsible for. And he felt that was an important starting point.

DW: I want to raise the issue of censorship, which you refer to throughout. This is from your book: "In his October 17 letter to RKO, [censor Joseph] Breen warned against killing cops on screen and insisted that the scene where Al shoots the policeman 'should be shot in such a manner as merely to suggest that the policeman has been badly wounded. We recommend that...you use such an angle as will preclude the showing of the policeman's body. Later in the story it is established that he died.'" Along with everything else, there is the paternalistic tone, these people treat the audience as though it were made up of five-year-olds.

MA: If I could defend Joseph Breen just for a moment, and I'm being a little ironic, he felt his role was to avoid the municipal censors. In other

words, if he could get the studios to make as many changes as possible on the West Coast *before* the municipal censors got their hands on the film, then that would be to everyone's benefit. That's how he justified it.

DW: Of course, the irony is, and this is no defense of Breen either, that sometimes the suggestion of sex or violence is more effective artistically. The artists used more interesting techniques to suggest things.

MA: A truly gifted director can use indirect means to suggest emotions and relationships. Of course, he or she can sometimes use more explicit means. But it's a matter of the talent behind the camera.

DW: I love the fact that, as you mention, the Australian censors wanted the "tension" removed from *Desperate*. That's the point of the whole movie! What were they protecting people from?

MA: They were upset by the ticking clock, and the close-ups of the eyes. It varied from area to area; that was one of the things that was so hellish for filmmakers. It varied not only from state to state, but from country to country, as to what they would allow. The fact that anything of quality emerged is remarkable.

DW: In *Railroded!* [1947], I think John Ireland and Jane Randolph, as the villains, are the most interesting characters. (Randolph was the woman in the swimming pool in that frightening scene in *Cat People* [1942].) And the scenes with the crime boss, Ainsworth, and his uncredited girl-friend.

The film has that conformist framework.

[The plot of *Railroded!* was loosely on the case of a Chicago man who spent more than a dozen years in jail for a crime he didn't commit. In Mann's film, Steve Ryan (Ed Kelly) is framed for a murder during a botched robbery by the actual crook (John Ireland) and his beautician girl-friend (Jane Randolph). The police are determined to send Steve to the electric chair, but his sister Sheila (Rosie Ryan) and, eventually, police sergeant Mickey Ferguson (Hugh Beaumont) clear things up.]

MA: Making the sister of the man railroaded by the police fall in love with Hugh Beaumont as a cop is adding insult to injury.

Originally, they wanted to follow an actual case in Chicago, involving a police frame-up. But the *Call Northside 777* [1948] project, with Jimmy Stewart, pre-empted them, and they changed the story dramatically. The early interrogation scenes are pretty disturbing, especially the role of Detective Chubb [Clancy Cooper], the thuggish cop. There is menace in those scenes. The cops want the electric chair.

The fact that Sgt. Ferguson, the Hugh Beaumont character, is participating in this gives a little complexity to it. But I raise questions as to whether Anthony Mann even directed the final scene of *Railroded!* *T-Men* had already started in production when they did the retakes. We don't know for certain that he even directed some of it. That's how it

worked. But the ending seems so tacked on, paint-by-numbers....

DW: This is where you have this comment about the censor boards run by the police. "Breen Sr. reminded an E-L [Eagle-Lion Films] executive 'that all police shown in this story should be presented favorably.' " Well, that settles the matter!

MA: Where do you go with that? How can you even attempt to deal with American society on the basis of a comment like that?

DW: They simply wanted "pro-American" propaganda films, no more nor less than Stalinist or fascist censors wanted their respective equivalents. Now, one has to say that to a considerable degree filmmakers didn't produce that, whatever they were being told to do.

MA: A surprising number of dirty cops appear. They're often painted as bad apples, but they're there.

DW: And the general attitude toward the police, the authorities, has so changed. In the films of that time, you're generally sympathetic to people on the run from the authorities.

Anyway, you continue in that passage to cite Breen, who writes, astonishingly: "You will have in mind that approximately 300 censor boards in this country are in the hands of the police departments of the various cities and for this reason, as well as the social implications, offense should be avoided in portraying law enforcing officers."

MA: That was very eye-opening, and that really points to the shackling of artists and creative people.

There hasn't been any study to my knowledge in regard to what these police and regional censorship offices actually did.

The ideological censorship that was going on is something we need to remember. It was not primarily an issue of whether too much skin was being exposed, or bad language, it was really about how American society was being portrayed.

At the time *Desperate* was in production, the Production Code was being amended again to include crime films. And at the end of 1947, there was going to be a whole new list of limitations placed on crime films, what you could or couldn't show.

DW: Now we're speaking about the sharp change that took place in American political life in 1947-1949, a steel door coming down. There was a vicious stepping up of the anti-communist campaign, including the HUAC [House Committee on Un-American Activities] hearings, the blacklist, the riot at the Paul Robeson concert, and so on.

The change in mood and atmosphere must have had an impact on someone like Mann, a sensitive individual.

MA: There's a bit of a debate over Mann's film *Reign of Terror* [1949], about the French Revolution. There are two schools of thought: one suggests that it's a right-wing film designed to use the French Revolution as a warning against potential revolution here, and that it equates the "reign of terror" in France with the Stalinist purges and so forth. But when you're watching the trial scenes in *Reign of Terror*, it's almost impossible not to think of the HUAC hearings. The film, in my view, is too witty, too knowing, too sardonic to be anti-communist propaganda of the time. I think something else is going on there.

DW: *T-Men* is the first film Mann made with John Alton as cinematographer?

[In *T-Men*, "Treasury agents Dennis O'Brien and Anthony Genaro (Dennis O'Keefe and Alfred Ryder)...go undercover to penetrate and smash a Detroit counterfeiting ring." O'Brien is accepted into the gang only after he endures a beating from the criminals, including Charles McGraw, and convinces them "his set of counterfeit plates are superior to those of their regular supplier, The Schemer (Wallace Ford)." Various twists and turns ensue, including a memorable killing in a steam bath.]

MA: The first affiliation with John Alton. Alton's book *Painting by Light* [1] provides a great deal of insight into how so many of those films—including Mann's—were made and what resources were available to

the cinematographers and directors.

DW: Again, a contradictory film, which has this horrible conformist advertisement for the US Treasury Department and its noble efforts.

MA: The film is all over the place. There are two films going on there, and I get the impression that Mann and Alton just wanted to get through the police scenes, when the officials are sitting in their office in D.C. talking about what they're going to be doing. Then, when we get back to the counterfeiters, that's when it becomes a movie again.

Mann singled out with pride a number of scenes in *T-Men*—the initial interrogation of the Dennis O'Keefe character by Charles McGraw in that seedy little hotel room, or apartment, and the murder scene in the steam bath with Wallace Ford, which is very chilling.

What harms *T-Men*, and many films of the time in general, is the narration. You have these superbly photographed and staged scenes, and you don't need a narrator telling you what is happening.

Mann had enormous respect for Charles McGraw, Wallace Ford and Dennis O'Keefe. He thought they were tremendous actors.

DW: The emotional intensity in Mann's films, which is rooted in an understanding of life and society, is almost overpowering at times.

MA: I was not prepared for that when I started this project. I was unprepared for the emotions. I found myself shedding tears in a number of cases. When Cathy O'Donnell in *Side Street* [1950] yells into the phone for her husband to run from the police.... Or Ruby Dee, as a slave, in *The Tall Target* [1951].

In one of his last interviews, Mann talked a little bit about the *Spartacus* [1960] situation, a film he started to direct and then departed from. He said that he and Kirk Douglas had a disagreement. I'm not quoting verbatim, but he said that Douglas wanted to focus on the issues, on lectures, on preaching, and Mann wanted to make these ideas visual.

Mann was asked in the interview if he felt that movies were there to provide a political outlet for the artist to make a statement, and he said, 'No, I don't think so...' But there were these ellipses after what he said, he never finished the sentence. And when you see his films, there are many political elements running through them.

DW: *Raw Deal* [1948] is one of my favorites. Dennis O'Keefe is a tremendously underrated actor, who died relatively young. It's interesting to think that he also acted in some of those Allan Dwan comedies [*Up in Mabel's Room*, 1944; *Brewster's Millions*, 1945; *Getting Gertie's Garter*, 1945]. In *Raw Deal*, he's such a tormented, complex figure. And Claire Trevor is remarkable too.

[Joe Sullivan (Dennis O'Keefe) breaks out of prison in *Raw Deal*, an escape arranged by crime boss Rick Coyle (Raymond Burr), who owes Joe \$50,000 and hopes he will die in the attempt. Joe and his girlfriend Pat Cameron (Claire Trevor) go on the run, in the company of Ann Martin (Marsha Hunt), taken along as a hostage. The trio undergo various misadventures—including an attempt on Joe's life by Rick's henchman—in the course of which Joe and Ann fall for each other. Joe, still planning to leave for South America with Pat, intends to exact revenge on Rick.]

MA: To me, the scene where O'Keefe and Claire Trevor are in the cabin of the ship waiting to leave for South America, where he is conducting this kind of stream-of-consciousness dialogue, trying to convince himself they have a future together. I consider that one of the most devastating moments in an Anthony Mann film. And a complex scene.

DW: And the character, supposedly something of a lowlife, has some depth to him. He's not putting it on, he's being sincere about trying to make this work, even though he's now in love with another woman. He's prepared to make this sacrifice because of what the Claire Trevor character did for him while he was in prison and so forth, her loyalty.

MA: This is precisely the kind of writing that we're missing today. My only regret is not knowing who wrote it, because various drafts of the

screenplay are not extant.

DW: And Marsha Hunt, who plays the “other woman,” was blacklisted.

MA: Yes, because she took a stand against the 1947 HUAC hearings. When *Raw Deal* was shown a year ago, in 2012, in Los Angeles, someone asked her about the blacklist era and she made a short, eloquent statement. She didn’t have too many memories of *Raw Deal* other than it was a very congenial set, and that she loved working with Dennis O’Keefe. She said that Mann was more concerned with the technology than the acting performances. I would argue that his style of directing was perhaps a little more subtle than she was used to. This was someone who came from the theater, a former actor.

Her character was supposed to be the voice of reason, and also to represent respect for law and order, and censor Joseph Breen would have liked more of that.

DW: It’s wonderful, in fact, because she’s very pious and self-righteous to begin with, and then she falls head over heels, outrageously, in love with O’Keefe, a supposed criminal on the run. Human beings are like that.

MA: That’s the beauty of *Raw Deal*. Complex characters, but there’s a consistent voice. And that voice is provided by Claire Trevor, as the narrator. Her existentialist commentary really added so much to that film.

DW: And there’s that odd little scene in which the killer on the lam comes into the cabin where O’Keefe and Trevor are hiding, and then gets brutally cut down by the police. I’m not sure what that’s supposed to tell you, except perhaps this is what lies in store for O’Keefe and company.

MA: Whit Bissell does a wonderful turn in this small part. You feel such sympathy for him, such pity, he’s not a hardened fugitive on the run. Ultimately, he can’t live without the woman he killed. The censor was not comfortable with that scene.

DW: There’s also the scene where Claire Trevor is lying on the couch in the foreground, and O’Keefe is in the background near the window. [See the publicity still included on this page, which has them in different positions.] There’s something in the scene that catches at each of the characters’ psychologies, their relations, the doomed nature of their situation....

MA: It points to the importance of composition and staging. That’s something Mann mastered; the theater training helped. He knew how to position people within the frame. Claire Trevor is laid out on the bed, her mind is off, and his mind is off. He’s thinking of the other woman, she’s thinking of him thinking of the other woman.

The moment cinematographer John Alton arrives, the films have a different photographic look to them, much more wide-angle lenses. They were a good team.

DW: *He Walked by Night* [1948] with Richard Basehart—for which Mann is not credited but he is believed to have directed the bulk of the film—is based on a real case you discuss, which occurred in Los Angeles, of a veteran and former police department employee who went on a crime spree. One of the questions that arises in my mind is the impact of World War II on some of those who fought in it, the violence that they carried back to the homeland.

[Based on the 1946 case of “Machine Gun” Walker, *He Walked by Night* concerns an “intelligent and skilled criminal psychopath [Richard Basehart] whose brilliance leaves law enforcers baffled for much of the story.... There are two stories being told continually, one from the police perspective and the other from that of the killer.” In the end, in “one of the greatest of all crime film sequences,” the police pursue the killer through the Los Angeles drain system.]

MA: It’s compelling how many protagonists in *film noir* are veterans and are very troubled. This is a guy who learned all this in the military. Richard Basehart, as I mention, was reluctant to take the role because there was hardly any dialogue.

The film seems to want to make more of the fact that the character was

formerly in the police, and they make clear he was a *civilian* employee, that he wasn’t a policeman. But the fact that he was in the army is not that much of an issue.

DW: Except, as you write, when Basehart is first stopped by the policeman and tells him he must have left his identification at home, “The cop politely persists, and Roy responds, ‘How about my army discharge? I got it right here...!’ Roy’s identification is a revolver and three bullets.”

The final storm-drain sequence is a tour de force, but there are also social implications, that they’re all in the sewer together, you know. The criminals and the cops are all in the same sewer, and it evens the playing field.

I saw *Border Incident* [1949] the other day. It’s all over the place. You have, again, these horrible conformist bits, about the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Mexican federal police. As you say, “Regrettably, producer Nicolas Nayfack inserted an end coda where the narrator returns with assurances, over footage of *braceros* [Mexican workers permitted to enter the US for a limited period of time, especially in agriculture] toiling in the produce fields, that all is well among Mexican laborers who are ‘now safe and secure, living under the protection of two great Republics—and the bounty of God almighty.’ ” Awful...

When George Murphy, who’s normally a bore, plays his undercover, hardboiled self, he’s actually very good.

Some of the shots of the face of the Mexican workers remind you of, I don’t know, Eisenstein or someone like that.

[In *Border Incident*, US and Mexican authorities join forces to crack down on a gang smuggling Mexican workers illegally into the US. “The focus of the film, however,” as Alvarez notes, “is not on the bracero migrant workers. Undercover agents, working on behalf of Mexican-U.S. government agencies committed (according to the film’s ideologies) to protecting exploited braceros, are the protagonists.” Ricardo Montalban plays a Mexican undercover agent and George Murphy his US counterpart. Soon-to-be-blacklisted Howard Da Silva is the chief crook.]

MA: There is some stunning footage there. *Border Incident* was a project that became more neutralized, socially less pointed, as it progressed. In the early versions, it’s almost done through the perspective of one of the Mexican peasants. And then the scripts bring in the cops...and it all starts to change.

It’s an MGM film. Dore Schary was one of the few liberal studio executives. He came over to MGM from RKO after Howard Hughes took over there. He wanted to bring along some of the sensibilities of the films he had worked on at RKO, despite the shadow of the blacklist. He was still concerned about a social perspective. Schary was the reason *Border Incident* was made, and then MGM threw it away.

This was the period of the MGM musicals. Ricardo Montalban, the star of *Border Incident*, was in some of the Esther Williams pictures [*Fiesta*, 1947; *On an Island with You*, 1948] and so on, and he wanted to do something different.

DW: Why has there been a loss of the ability to create genuine suspense, or even to film action sequences?

MA: There seems to have been a loss of a master sequence that really stands out. I believe it has something to do with the lack of control that directors have in the film industry. Everything is so controlled by creative directors, creative focus groups, executive producers. Everything is so sliced and diced, it’s almost impossible to have a sequence planned out that isn’t tampered with. Directors have a lot less control now than they had in the 1950s and 1960s. There’s a reliance on cheap special effects as opposed to the kind of suspense you’re talking about.

DW: I’m sure you’re right, but I also think you have to have a purpose and an idea to create a coherent sequence. To mount a consistent, integral drama, even a relatively simple one, you have to have some idea of the world and some idea of the impact you’re trying to create.

Side Street, again, is something of a mixed result. Paul Kelly, who plays a cop in this film, is always great presence. But here the most interesting thing, as you point out, is the critique of the American Dream. Here's a guy, this temporary mailman, who's poor, who grabs the money because he wants to be somebody, he wants to buy his wife a fur coat, and so on.

[Joe Norson (Farley Granger) in *Side Street* is a temporary young mailman, pressed for money, but full of big dreams. Joe "steals from an office of blackmailers an envelope containing \$30,000. Joe's reform comes too late: the man holding the money [for him] disappears and is murdered. Police suspect and pursue the mailman, who becomes a fugitive in his own heartless city and separated from his expectant wife (Cathy O'Donnell)."] The end of the film, which takes place in the financial district, Alvarez explains, "alludes to the Manhattan class divide."]

MA: The first drafts of the Sydney Boehm screenplay are not politically subtle, in referring to the tenements and Wall Street, to the social divide in New York.

DW: Kelly narrates: "New York City: an architectural jungle where fabulous wealth and the deepest squalor live side by side. New York: the busiest, the loneliest, the kindest and the cruelest of cities." That's what remains of the original?

MA: Yes, and I was impressed there was that much left. Originally, Boehm had much more about the social situation. And then the ending of the film, which takes place on Wall Street, is clearly intended to make a point about the social divide.

DW: The blacklist, the purges weren't for nothing. They wanted to put a stop to that kind of thing. Various films are clearly making a comment on capitalism, although they generally don't say so directly.

The Tall Target is a well-made, suspenseful film about an assassination plot against Abraham Lincoln prior to his inauguration in 1861. Dick Powell, Adolphe Menjou, Ruby Dee, Will Geer are all excellent. But the brusque ending is a disappointment. The film is tearing along, like the train, and then it simply seems to stop. You already mentioned Ruby Dee's beautiful, restrained performance as a slave.

[Mann's *The Tall Target* follows a New York City detective, John Kennedy (Dick Powell), who believes he has uncovered a plot in February 1861 to assassinate President-elect Abraham Lincoln. Rebuffed by his superiors, Kennedy takes a train for Baltimore where he suspects the assassination will take place. En route, the detective tangles with and eventually foils the plotters, including US army officers. "*The Tall Target* is a crime thriller...with serious *film noir* overtones," as Alvarez observes.]

MA: The slave character's moving dialogue in the train compartment was in the Art Cohn version of the script. Cohn was a screenwriter who tragically died in the airplane crash that killed producer Michael Todd in March 1958. Cohn was working on Todd's biography. He had worked on the Robert Wise film, *The Set-Up* [1949], among other things, including Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli* [1950].

Mann is walking a fine line in *The Tall Target*, working for MGM, a very conservative studio. Had this been made for United Artists, perhaps it would have gone farther. Ruby Dee's face is so moving. Mann did close-ups of her. He loved film for what it could do that the theater couldn't do. Today, directors do close-ups because they're framing them all on computer screens, or they're doing them with television in mind, but Mann and others of his generation used close-ups for a dramatic reason.

DW: I'd like to discuss Anthony Mann's westerns briefly, or why he—and others—turned almost exclusively to making westerns in the early 1950s. I'd like to be as nuanced as possible, but I do think that the western was something of a refuge. The directors who turned in this direction, consciously or not, found contemporary America too dangerous to shoot films about...too hot to handle. They removed themselves from the dangers, whether they meant to or not. They proceeded to set their moral

dramas in a different age, and under different circumstances, and often in the form of allegories or parables. It wasn't their fault; the situation was forced on them by the anti-communist purges, the entire Cold War atmosphere. And perhaps that desire for a distancing from the present went for audiences too. They also were intimidated, to a certain extent.

I love Mann's westerns. James Stewart is astonishing in them. But I do think something's lost. Something's obviously gained, more coherent scripts in some cases, bigger budgets, color, and so on. But an urgency, a contemporaneity, a critical edge are lost. Of course, those elements are lost to a large degree, or perhaps *submerged*, in American pictures in general; it's not Mann's personal problem.

There is something powerful about the films of the late 1940s, because you see big, dirty, corrupt cities. You see workers, you see various social layers, including sinister big business types. Some of that complexity and social texture disappears.

MA: I'm with you. I personally prefer the dirty cities and the contemporary look. I just feel I learn more. I think those films just open themselves up to so many possibilities.

In Anthony Mann's case, he just kept making bigger and bigger pictures, including epics, and eventually, tragically, it killed him.

[1] Republished in 2013 by University of California Press

Concluded



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