

HOOVERVILLE WEST: The Hollywood G-Man, 1934-1945

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## The Hollywood

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One wonders: What did John Dillinger think of the last movie he saw? It was Metro's *MANHATTAN MELODRAMA*, glossy gangster stuff with the familiar Cain-and-Abel plot, and Dillinger must have derived some mild amusement from watching Clark Gable impersonate a racketeer and gambler who's a softy at heart and who not only loses his girl friend, Myrna Loy, to his lifelong pal, D.A. William Powell, but also goes to the electric chair like a gangland Sidney Carton doing a far far better thing to preserve the lovers' happiness and Powell's political career. Dillinger's probably derisive critique of the film went unrecorded, of course. He was killed as he left Chicago's Biograph Theatre that night, September 22, 1934, in an ambush coordinated by FBI agent Melvin Purvis—or was it Bureau Chief J. Edgar Hoover?

The end of the Capone Era—a decade of organized crime that had grown naturally and spontaneously from the everyday realities of Prohibition, and whose exploits and style had infiltrated stage and screen and, through them, the national consciousness—left an emotional vacuum in the minds of most Americans. It was too perfect a moment to pass up, and J. Edgar Hoover seized it. He profited first from the impact of the Lindbergh kidnaping in 1932 (a crime so hateful that Al Capone himself offered from

his prison cell an unsolicited hand in cracking the case) and then from the rash of bank robberies by those individual entrepreneurs of the Midwest, the Depression desperadoes: Alvin Karpis, "Pretty Boy" Floyd, Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, "Ma" Barker, and the most charismatic criminal of the Thirties, John Dillinger.

Before 1933, the Bureau of Investigation had merely dealt with violations of the Dyer Act, which made a federal offense of transporting stolen cars across state lines. Agents of the Bureau didn't have the power to carry arms or make arrests; this privilege and duty belonged to local police forces or marshalls, which explains why the Bureau had remained an obscure agency throughout Prohibition. But the Lindbergh Law, one of the earliest bills passed by the Roosevelt Administration, made a federal offense the sending of ransom notes through the mail and the crossing of state lines in kidnap cases. A year later, in the wake of those notorious heists in the Midwest, some new offenses were added to the list: the robbing of national banks, racketeering in interstate trade, the crossing of state lines in order to avoid prosecution or giving testimony, the transporting of stolen goods across state lines, and finally, resisting a federal officer.

Along with the new powers and responsibilities came a new image for the

Bureau. The unassuming title of Bureau of Investigation was expanded into the more impressive Federal Bureau of Investigation—which seemed to suggest that it was the one and only federal agency of its kind. In fact, although the Bureau took almost exclusive credit for the solving of the Lindbergh case, it was the Treasury Department investigators who had actually insisted, against Lindbergh's promise to the kidnapers, on marking the ransom money and who, more than two-and-a-half years after the abduction and subsequent death of the Lindbergh baby, had traced some of the bills to Bruno Richard Hauptmann in the Bronx. Among other cases in which Hoover grabbed the credit for his agents were the Robinson kidnap case in Pasadena, and the capture of bank robber Harry Brunette, in which the FBI jumped the gun on both the New Jersey and New York police.

To build up the image of the FBI as an elite outfit, vividness was often stressed over authenticity. The kidnaping of Charles Urschel in Oklahoma City in July 1933 provided the most famous instance. The very night of the kidnaping Hoover was on a direct line to Mrs. Urschel; the final capture of the culprit, a rather minor and unviolent hood ironically dubbed "Machine Gun" Kelly, was a master stroke of legend-making. According to the FBI, Kelly had screamed

# VERVILLE EST



J. Edgar Hoover in the 1930's (above) oversaw the making of most Hollywood FBI films, including the archetypal G-MAN (opposite), with dressalikes James Cagney and Barton MacLane.

G-Man, 1934-1945

by Carlos Clarens

"Don't shoot, G-Men!" before surrendering, and the hitherto faceless and nameless special agents, sometimes referred to vaguely as "feds," stood nicknamed for posterity. (G-Man, the FBI promptly explained, was an underworld abbreviation of "Government Man.") Perhaps apocryphal, Kelly's line was a semantic necessity, corresponding to that other momentous change in the popular parlance of the Twenties when malefactors ceased to be "crooks" to become "gangsters."

The image that Hoover and his publicist, Louis B. Nichols, created for the FBI agent was that of a dedicated, clean-cut crusader, a courageous fighter who was also an expert in the most advanced techniques of crime detection. But above all, the G-Man was incorruptible, a trait that was especially appreciated after the bribery scandals of the preceding decade. Hoover added some shrewd touches to his campaign. The Public Enemy Number One accolade, vested on a succession of criminals, was timed to precede either their capture or their death. And to further convince the nation of the necessity of his tactics, Hoover had statistics compiled that soon became the yardstick by which the ills of American society were to be gauged for the next forty years.

The Bureau's Crime Records Division fed case after successful case to newspa-

pers, magazines, pulps, radio programs, and comic strips. The best-known cases involved a new breed of felon, of almost pure American stock, who displaced the flashy-foreign urban mobster from the front pages and who established an affective rapport with the gunfighters of the Old West. Their ambitions seemed engagingly modest when compared to those of such empire builders as Al Capone and Arnold Rothstein. To the reading and listening public they appeared closer to home than the Chicago mobsters of old—just-folks who had also felt the pinch and improvised a life of crime. And they were colorful characters who, least of all, wished to remain anonymous, often writing letters to the local papers and police and, in the case of Bonnie Parker, leaving sentimental poetry scattered behind them that would unfailingly find its way into the papers. They became the prize trophies in this short, violent chapter of FBI history.

None of these (Karpis or Barrow, Barker or Parker) was claimed by the movies at the time—not even John Dillinger, a Midwestern legend in his own brief lifetime, and Hoover's personal fetish. Dapper, athletic, theatrical, Dillinger started his crime career in earnest after his parole in May 1933 from the Indiana State Prison, where he had served four years for felony and assault, from then on pulling a series of daring bank

robberies and two highly dramatic jailbreaks. In the second of these, Dillinger drove his getaway car from Indiana into Illinois, a federal offense and just what Hoover was waiting for. On April 30, 1934, Dillinger and four gang members, including "Baby Face" Nelson, succeeded in escaping from an FBI siege at the Little Bohemia Lodge, a Wisconsin roadhouse.

At thirty-one, Dillinger was proclaimed Public Enemy Number One, although it has never been proved to this day that he ever killed anyone personally. Three months later, he walked out of the Biograph Theatre and into the last act of his own melodrama. There was, and still is, reasonable doubt as to the identity of the man shot as Dillinger that night. The Bureau claimed that the criminal had undergone plastic surgery in Chicago shortly before his death, and that his fingerprints had been erased by acid, which made absolute identification impossible. Needless to say, the Dillinger legend loses nothing in either version.

Dillinger, however, was to remain off-limits to the movies for the next eleven years—as ordered in a telegram sent by Will Hays, the czar of the Motion Picture Producers Association, to Administrator Joseph Breen shortly after Dillinger's death: "No motion picture on the life or exploits of John Dillinger will

be produced, distributed, or exhibited by any member [of the MPPA] . . . This decision is based on the belief that the production, distribution, or exhibition of such a picture could be detrimental to the best public interest. Advise all studio heads accordingly."

But there were other forces at work to prevent the Dillinger story from reaching the screen. Hoover cherished the case as the exclusive property of the Bureau, despite public knowledge that most of the credit for Dillinger's demise belonged to Melvin Purvis. Hoover, who never tolerated any personality cult other than his own within the agency, appears to have been outraged by Purvis's lack of departmental discretion. Purvis is never mentioned in the semi-official history of the Bureau, Don Whitehead's *The F.B.I. Story*; credit for the Dillinger operation is shifted over to the Chicago Bureau Chief, who was nowhere near the Biograph that memorable night. But in the mid-Thirties, the names of Dillinger and Purvis were so closely entangled that Hoover added his weight to the Hays Office interdiction. A few salient facts of the case were freely borrowed by Hollywood in the spate of films that followed; but the name of Dillinger was never mentioned and neither, much to Hoover's relief, was Purvis's.

At the time of Dillinger's death, Hoover still distrusted the movies; like most law enforcers, he blamed Hollywood for glorifying crime. He had declined to cooperate with requests of access to the files of the FBI, and film producers knew that it was almost impossible to get around the Hays Code without some sort of endorsement from the Bureau. Jack L. Warner, a good friend of Hoover's, finally convinced him that the Bureau of Investigation should get screen representation; the films were then running far behind other media which, as Jack Alexander wrote in his *New Yorker* profile of Hoover, "bloomed with sagas of aggressive federal purity." It was also poetic justice that the studio that in the eyes of the public had contributed the most to promote the image of the criminal should now raise Hoover's boys to the same popular status.

In most existing prints of *G-MEN* (1935) the seal of Department of Justice follows immediately the Warner Brothers logo, Hoover's seal of approval granted for a 1949 reissue, on the occasion of the Bureau's twenty-fifth anniversary. (Hoover's Bureau, that is. The original Bureau of Investigation was created as a secret agency of the Department of Justice by Theodore Roosevelt in 1908. Hoover was appointed Acting Director in 1924.) A filmed prologue added at the time refers to the picture as "the granddaddy of all G-Men pictures," but there's evidence on the screen that

*G-MEN* came to be a model in a rather haphazard fashion. It certainly didn't start out as anything more institutional than a good action film, but along the way certain features were added and certain traits began to appear. There doesn't seem to have been any direct supervision from the Bureau, as was the case with *The F.B.I.*, the television series of the Sixties. Hoover, according to Warners press releases, supplied a few technical advisors and passed approval on the leading man.

It doesn't seem likely that either Paul Muni or Edward G. Robinson, both under contract to Warners at the time, were considered for the first official role of an FBI agent when one considers the Bureau's traditional distrust of most things Jewish and all things intellectual. To inaugurate the image, James Cagney was the logical choice, even when the picture has to work overtime to dispel old resonances, mostly the echo of a hundred gun shots, every time he lugs a submachine gun. Purity doesn't come as naturally to Cagney as aggressiveness. At his most familiar ease, moving in and out of the precincts of the underworld, one knows that Cagney could easily infiltrate any mob. He makes the G-Man the gangster's doppelgänger, his Other.

The story of *G-MEN* is adapted from Gregory Rogers' *Public Enemy No. 1*, one of several reportages cashing in on the Dillinger-Purvis popularity, but the film mentions neither the gangster nor the G-Man by name. ("All characters and events depicted in this photoplay . . ." etc.) The screenplay—by Seton I. Miller, who also worked on *SCARFACE*—changes the emphasis from the unmaking of a criminal to the making of a G-Man, and as such it borrows a few clichés from "service" movies: the trainee is submitted to some routine hazing by his counselors, who at first resent or misinterpret his punk mannerisms, his credentials (Cagney's Brick Davis is supposed to be a Phi Beta Kappa from the slums), and the fact that he was sponsored through law school by a retired bootlegger. From this period of trial, Brick emerges a fully appointed G-Man; fully armed as well, since the historic Congressional bill is passed halfway through the picture. Brick then puts his knowledge of the crime world to splendid use, tracing a gardenia found in a getaway car to a gangster he had known in his pre-Bureau days and who was involved in the murder of a college friend. A hunch is worth hours of dreary detection and the FBI gets its man.

The film bides its time until the revenge motif is firmly established, then explodes on the viewer the kind of violence that had been missing from the screen since the days of *SCARFACE* and which, incidentally, got *G-MEN* banned

in Chicago. The big, expert set-piece is based on the siege of the Little Bohemia Lodge; but whereas that particular incident proved to be a fiasco for the Bureau, and Dillinger and most of his men escaped through the sheer mismanagement of the operation, the fictional counterpart is a thrilling battle that ends in the near extermination of the gang. Miller and director William Keighley also use it as a turning point in Brick's indoctrination—the cutting of his umbilical cord to the underworld—for Brick is forced to shoot his erstwhile benefactor (William Harrigan), held hostage by the brutish, hulking Dillinger distortion (Barton MacLane) and used as a shield to effect his getaway. The fatherly bootlegger dies in Brick's arms, but not before absolving him of any Oedipian guilt: "You're O.K., kid."

The final section of the film deals with a kidnaping, a crime so distasteful to the Hays Office that it had remained *verboten* on the screen since *MISS FANE'S BABY IS STOLEN* early in 1934, before the interdiction had been enforced. For *G-MEN*, the kidnap victim was made a woman instead of a child: a starched sexless nurse (Margaret Lindsay) which the picture promotes as heroine, bypassing the wistful chorus-girl (Ann Dvorak), typed from the start as not-quite-right for a future G-Man and married thereon to the villain. Shot while passing on information about the abduction, she dies in Brick's arms, begging him to kiss her, just this once, *in extremis*, which he does. The gangster film saw women mainly as predators, but the law enforcement film exploited them as victims—a tactic guaranteed to outrage and alarm the general public, and which had been efficiently tested in real life during the "white slavery" hysteria of 1910.

Hoover aimed at instilling a feeling of a threatened society, at creating the impression that only his small but growing force of elite crusaders stood between the safety of American women and children and all the assorted mobsters, mad-dog killers, and public enemies. As such, *G-MEN* made a fairly effective recruiting poster. Still, it didn't take long for moviemakers to realize that it's not legality that will hold the public's imagination, but causality, the sequence of cause and effect, that will capture audience identification; and identification has always been Hollywood's main concern. The mechanism of outrage and retribution is the prime mover of the law enforcement films; after all, there is all that violence to be justified. Apart from a few specific locales and props, such as laboratories, charts, the paraphernalia of detection, the crime-buster film lacked an imagery of its own. All one needs is to look at two stills from two James Cagney films of such different orientation as



**Top left:** A young, bespectacled Robert Taylor in *BURIED LOOT* (1935), first in MGM's *Crime Does Not Pay* series. **Bottom left:** Leo Carillo, William Powell, Clark Gable in *MANHATTAN MELO-DRAMA*. **Top right:** Preston Foster as *ROGER TOUHY, GANGSTER*. **Bottom right:** Lawrence Tierney in *DILLINGER*.

G-MEN and THE ROARING TWENTIES. The labeling may vary, but the costuming, the weaponry, the physical details of the character are the same. The protagonists in both are defined as men of action; in fact, the detective has been mobsterized. If, as the advocates of the Bureau contended, kids all over the country were now playing at being G-Men instead of gangsters, it was because the spectacular theatrics of violence were available to both.

It's probably to Hoover's credit that the G-Man films never attained the rabid excesses of the vigilante movie. The typecasting may be loaded (those prim, dedicated young WASPs pitted against the flashy Latin hoods), but the FBI's objective is certainly not to encourage citizens to become law enforcers; it's to train them to recognize the symptoms of crime and relay them to the agency. There remains a whiff of vigilantism in the air. Darryl F. Zanuck's *SHOW THEM NO MERCY* (a title that has the ring of one of Hoover's own slogans) begins with an American family, made archetypal by the presence of a child and a dog, held prisoner by a gang of kidnapers hiding out in an abandoned farm with the ransom money from their last job. The young parents are appealingly helpless at first; but as menace piles up on humiliation, they grow aware of the necessity of fighting for their baby, that

is, for the future. And it is the wife who, after the rest of the gang has been decimated by the law enforcers, personally and graphically machine-guns the last remaining gangster—a call to arms to the wives and mothers of America, and a blatant exception to the Hays rule that all wounds must be invisible.

Anticipating the inevitable outcry at this new recurrence of screen violence, the Bureau quickly revised the strategy to emphasize the process of detection instead of the depiction of violence, no matter how justifiable or retributive. Hoover himself made a rare appearance in *YOU CAN'T GET AWAY WITH IT* (1936), a three-reel documentary that used newsreel shots of despoiled banks and bullet-torn cars to illustrate the pursuit, capture, or extermination of such criminals as Dillinger and Baby Face Nelson. Intercut with these shots were authentic scenes of scientific detective work at the agency (ballistics tests, microscopic analysis, the workings of the massive Central Fingerprints Bureau) of which the FBI could justly be proud.

But the ideal format of the law-and-order crusade proved to be the one-and-two-reelers of the *Crime Does Not Pay* series which Metro launched with *BURIED LOOT* in 1935 and continued to release at regular intervals for more than a decade, and which were meant to stimulate pub-

lic trust on behalf of the several branches of the law. Aimed as they were at a youthful audience, often preceding the main feature as a gesture of responsibility, the shorts codified every element, from the opening shots of a badge, a gun firing directly at the viewer, and a car chase which became the visual leitmotif of much of the series, to the schematization of locale ("a large Midwestern city") and character ("for obvious reasons names have been changed").

The various subjects included all sorts of crimes and misdemeanors, from loan-shark racketeering (in *MONEY TO LOAN*, 1939) to shoplifting (*THINK FIRST*, 1939) to illegal adoption (*WOMEN IN HIDING*, 1940). Far from making the attentive moviegoer conscious of the unsuspected variety of delinquents proliferating during the Depression, the formula always dramatized for reassurance, stressing the public's obligation to cooperate with the law. But except for *JACK POT* (1940), an exposé of the nationwide slot-machine racket, any reference to the Mafia, the Syndicate, Murder Inc.—the underworld empires of the decade whose existence the FBI persisted in ignoring or denying—is conspicuously missing from the series.

The series, initially produced by Jack Chertok, reached quite a high level of conciseness and skill, benefiting from the largesse of MGM, which allowed

them to use standing sets and stock footage from their more expensive projects, as well as rising young contract players such as Robert Taylor, Van Johnson, Laraine Day, Cameron Mitchell, etc. Directors like Fred Zinnemann, Jacques Tourneur, David Miller, and Joseph Losey found it a useful, if necessarily limited, training ground; forced to make every shot count was a good opportunity to introduce a little *mise-en-scène*, but generally the series emphasized montage. At least one short broke away from the series to become a feature, Tourneur's *THEY ALL COME OUT* (1939), originally commissioned by the Justice Department as a documentary on federal prisons, and which at seven reels deals more sympathetically with the plight of ex-convicts in attempting to rehabilitate

be read at a glance. Naturally, they served with the same efficiency during World War Two, when spies, saboteurs, alien smugglers, and black-market operators were added to the rogue's gallery.

The *Crime Does Not Pay* series was phased out shortly after the war, simply by allowing a certain complexity of motives to creep into story and characterization, that touch of gray that would make the American film *noir* to vigilant French eyes. The hero of the closing episode, *LUCKIEST GUY IN THE WORLD* (1947), is no professional criminal, just an irresponsible husband (Barry Nelson) who accidentally kills his wife in an argument over money; a subsequent, premeditated murder to cover up the wife's death turns the bungling amateur into the perfect criminal. And the hus-

*Hiding* and was reported to be joining the film industry in an executive capacity in March 1939, the four movies drawn from the various case histories in the book never quite made it as A-productions. They were relegated by Paramount, which acquired the rights, to the lower half of double bills, where they could be seen promoting law, order, and the Bureau—often at loggerheads with the main attraction, the big, spectacular gangster pictures that had backlashed into fashion by the late Thirties.

Hoover and Hollywood had discovered—in propaganda—an antitoxin, or panacea, for the domestic crime epidemic of the Thirties. Now, in the war years, they would do battle against enemy subversion. As if the unspeakable crime of foreign aggression could eradicate domestic delinquency, the gangster figure—which in the previous years had been rendered as nostalgic (in *THE ROARING TWENTIES*), pathological (in *BLIND ALLEY*), or existential (in *HIGH SIERRA*)—virtually disappeared from the screen between 1941 and 1945, to be replaced for the purposes of conflict with the recycled version of the Abominable Hun or a new and improved Yellow Peril. From the Hollywood output of the war years one would deduce that all major crime perpetrated in the nation was the work of spies and saboteurs—that, in fact, these were the only barbarians within.

The anti-Nazi campaign was launched by Warner Brothers with their production of *CONFESSIONS OF A NAZI SPY* (1939). The film wasn't quite as timely as it purported to be, for two years had elapsed since the columnist Heywood Broun first denounced the subversive activities of the German-American Bund. But it had taken months to overcome the traditional timidity of the New York executives, until the closing of the Warners exchange in Berlin following the stomping and death of the manager in a riot sent the project into production with the studio taking all kinds of precautionary measures. The boldness of the enterprise must have been greatly relished by Jack L. Warner himself who, in his memoirs, claims that making the picture placed him on Hitler's personal death list; and by Edward G. Robinson, starred as an FBI agent, who was compelled by threatening letters to place his family and himself under surveillance for a time. The screenplay was adapted from Leon G. Turrou's *The Nazi Spy Conspiracy in America*, which took the story of German subversion in the United States up to the arrest and conviction of four agents in December 1938. Turrou, the Bureau agent who directed the operation, subsequently resigned to write the book and aid in the production of the film version.

Its main usefulness was to familiarize



REAL CRIME: from *THE CRY OF THE WORLD* (1932).

themselves than it ever could, given the aim of the series, in its original two. Another, Losey's *A GUN IN HIS HAND* (1945), contains the core of a story later developed in his feature, *THE PROWLER* (1950).

In many episodes, an actor identified as "your MGM Crime Reporter" introduces an official, such as a judge or police captain or FBI agent, who delivers a lecture straight at the audience—a redundancy to say the least, since what made the series such effective propaganda was their ideological transparency which never permitted anything extraneous, whether motivation or ambiguity, to muddle the blacks and whites of the message. The series profited from typecasting, elevating actors to the category of signs in which a (+) or a (-) could

band collects all sorts of benefits until one evening when, as an innocent bystander in a street gunfight, he's hit by a stray bullet. His dying words—"I almost got away with murder"—could serve as a proper epitaph for the series, which, in most of its forty-eight installments, had managed to refuse the intervention of fate as much as it did the fallibility of the law.

But in their heyday, the mid-Thirties, the shorts were judged so effective in the curbing of crime that Metro could boast of endorsements from the Attorney General, and even from Hoover himself; plus two Academy Awards. Hollywood paid its dues to the law throughout the late Thirties, but mostly in the shape of dozens of B-films. Even though Hoover was the purported author of *Persons in*

the filmgoer with the policies of the Nazi regime, (although, curiously, there was no reference to anti-semitism). Nazis, as a rule, can be recognized by their Teutonic features, their heavy overcoats, and their willingness to beat up loyal German-Americans—as if “Dutch” Schultz and his gang were still working the protection racket in the streets of Yorkville. The film’s *cri de coeur* is improbably placed in the mouth of an American legionnaire (Ward Bond) as he’s being evicted from a Bund rally: “You guys are worse than gangsters!”

Robinson provides a calm omniscience that would further implant in the American consciousness the image of the G-Man as the man who knows best. The viewer is reassured that the nation is in good hands, that a flawlessly humane system is operating. Like Inspector Maigret, Robinson carries a pipe instead of a pistol, never indulges in shooting matches; he just sits the conspiracy out. Like every effective father figure, Robinson’s FBI agent knows when to coddle as much as how to punish: “There’s no third degree with the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” he tells the cringing, Bronx bumbler of a spy (Francis Lederer), who then responds to fair play by spilling everything he knows. And the picture’s epilogue sends the audience home comforted and proud, as good propaganda should. The G-Man overhears a soda-jerk deliver a bellicose speech to his customers that ends with “We’ll show them.” “The voice of the people, thank God,” mutters Robinson, lighting his pipe as if a minitorch of liberty.

Hollywood had abandoned its isolationist position and found itself a perfect all-purpose villain two and a half years before war was officially declared on Nazi Germany. In the unstable days between Munich and Pearl Harbor, Nazi conspiracies flourished on the American screen more often than in American soil. At war’s end, passion and hysteria spent, the FBI felt it safe and encouraging to disclose that a mere twenty-seven foreigners had been convicted of espionage from 1938 to 1945, against sixty-four American traitors, and that not one single instance of enemy-induced sabotage had been proved. The facts bore witness to Hoover’s efficiency as well as to Hollywood’s paranoia, which did not always run on parallel tracks.

In one instance, at least, the name and prestige of the FBI was appropriated for a Hollywood movie without Hoover’s full consent. It was a B-film named *THEY CAME TO BLOW UP AMERICA*, produced by 20th Century-Fox in 1943, and it carried a pointed foreword to the effect that the facts depicted were not authenticated by the Bureau. In the summer of 1942, two four-men saboteur groups had been put

ashore by submarines in Long Island and Florida; fourteen days after, all eight were in the hands of the FBI. Tried in military court, they were convicted of espionage and six of them electrocuted. The FBI had little cause for pride in the whole operation, though. The Germans had acted in a most unprofessional manner from the start, offering a bribe to a Coastguardsman who had caught them in the act of debarking in Amagansett. After that, the mission seemed doomed to two of the saboteurs and they subsequently betrayed their comrades to the FBI, who acted promptly on their phone call and rounded up the rest of the party. Because of their assistance, Peter Burger and George Dasch had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment.

*THEY CAME TO BLOW UP AMERICA* offered its version of the sabotage mission, why it had failed and why two of its members had been spared the electric chair. The movie’s hero, rechristened Carl Steelman and played by George Sanders, became an FBI agent who poses as a Bund member to be recruited by the Gestapo and trained at a sabotage school in Berlin; he obtains a list of secret agents operating in the United States and leads his own sabotage group into the hands of the waiting G-Men. Clearly, there was very little glory for either side in the true facts of the case, and the FBI would have preferred to draw a useful and discreet silence over an affair whose success resulted from a combination of chance and faulty logistics. Most of the facts, however, were in the public domain and the film could be made without authorized access to the Bureau files.

By comparison with period headlines the exploits of Roger Touhy appear quite mild. Touhy, a second-rate underworld figure of the Thirties, had been convicted of kidnaping in 1936 and was serving a ninety-nine-year sentence at the Stateville Prison in Joliet, Illinois, when on October 9, 1942, he and some other convicts effected a spectacular daylight jailbreak by stealing a truck, scaling the walls, and escaping by car, leaving behind two wounded guards. In the ensuing two months, Touhy was the object of a nationwide dragnet, the most intensive in the war years. On December 29, the police closed in on their Chicago hideout. Two members of the reorganized Touhy gang were killed by sub-machine guns; the rest, including Touhy, surrendered to the police.

During the time when he was a fugitive, Touhy managed to displace more than one historical event from the popular consciousness. To the tabloids it meant a welcome return to the prewar days of John Dillinger and Alvin Karpis. Even before he was recaptured, a film project was under consideration at 20th Century-Fox to be based on the notori-

ous “over the wall” escape. The even more publicized capture changed the original concept. Director Robert Florey and a camera crew were dispatched to Chicago in January 1943, just a few days after the events, to photograph the actual locations. It was the first time that such a thorough location shooting had taken place. “The shooting at 1254-56 Leland Avenue had taken place just a few days before, and the place was a mess,” recalls Florey. “For a week at Joliet, the warden allowed us to shoot many scenes and ‘plates’ inside and in the courtyard, using trustees as doubles and reproducing the escape in long shots.” Florey was allowed to interview Touhy himself and other members of the gang who were still at Joliet.

ROGER TOUHY, GANGSTER was completed in a tight thirty-three days at the studio, then ran into all sorts of interference. The script (by Crane Wilbur and Jerry Cady) refrained from using any real names other than those of Touhy and his lieutenant, Basil Banghart; yet Fox was threatened with a suit by Jake “The Barber,” the kidnap victim and a one-time Touhy associate. The general antipathy to the project is obvious in the cuts demanded by the Hays Office: one whole reel, on the grounds of extreme violence—“Bad for the general public,” according to Florey. Even though the FBI takes a good share of the credit in the film, the Bureau insisted on a disclaimer to warn the public that the portrayal of agents in the movie did not constitute an endorsement from the FBI and should not be construed as a seal of approval on the material. Hemmed in from all sides, Fox considered shelving the picture but finally resolved to release it more than a year later, when the case was almost forgotten. Even then, a cautious statement from the producer instructed exhibitors in the pressbook that “we wouldn’t be justified in making a picture about Touhy except that he is representative of an era—and thank goodness, a passing era at that.”

The irony of it all is that TOUHY, disowned by the Bureau, was pioneering the semi-documentary techniques that two years later would become the trademark of the semi-factual exposés endorsed by the FBI: location photography, precise identification of characters and locale, a concluding on-camera speech by an official (in this case, by the Stateville warden). The prison break which is the film’s *pièce de résistance*, is cool, distanced, as if done by a newsreel crew. In the film’s mutilated form, Touhy (played by Preston Foster) is neither hero nor victim, and definitely lacks the appeal of his fictional forerunners. He’s the sort of unsympathetic gangster usually confined to playing the heavy in Thirties movies. His calculated meanness further robs the character of

any sympathy, and in this respect the film may be faithful for once to the criminal it depicted, a two-bit, ugly, brutal punk. But curiously, for a picture that portrays Prohibition and Repeal as events from another century, there is hardly any feeling for a period that was then just a decade away. Film memory has come to replace first-hand knowledge of the period.

While causing nothing but headaches for the TOUHY team, Hoover was, in fact, shrewdly waiting for the right filmmaker and the right moment to fling open the Bureau files. The right man came along at the end of 1944. The war was going well for the Allies, and the FBI had every reason to boast of its wartime record. Hoover pledged his cooperation to Louis De Rochemont, producer of *The March of Time*. De Rochemont was used to working with factual footage (more recently he had organized masses of Navy combat film into an entertaining and salable documentary feature, *THE FIGHTING LADY*), and it was understood from the start that the deal would involve the use of Bureau films, as well as permission to shoot scenes within the Department.

In the strict sense, the picture—released by Fox as *THE HOUSE ON 92ND STREET*—would not be a documentary but a fictional amalgam of cases drawn from the files, which were open as much as security permitted and placed at the disposal of the screenwriter. Every professional actor and technician had to be investigated by the Bureau beforehand, in part because they would come in close contact with classified material; but also, where actors were concerned, because Hoover felt that the FBI had definitely outgrown the Thirties image of the G-Man as a gun-toting federal lawyer.

Lloyd Nolan, who appeared in *G-MEN* as an athletic instructor and had played many a gangster and convict early in his career, was chosen to play the seasoned FBI inspector. Both he and William Eythe, who played an undercover agent, went through a two-week indoctrination course at the Bureau training school. Nolan made a rock-solid anchorman and Eythe, younger and less familiar to filmgoers, was appealing and vulnerable. The interplay of fatherly experience and youthful daring gradually became a staple of the genre, replacing the love interest hitherto considered indispensable. One cannot help feeling that Hoover was relieved and flattered to have his own celibacy adopted by Hollywood's G-Men; it was almost an assertion that the service of the nation exacted a crusader's total commitment and left no time for romantic involvements. (The clearance of cast and personnel must have been done exclusively on a political basis, since one important role was ac-

tually played by a homosexual. Or possibly Hoover's paranoid vigilance had yet to reach the peak of later years when he would order whole sequences of Mervyn LeRoy's *THE FBI STORY* reshot because he disapproved of the politics, sexual and other, of a couple of extras in the background.)

But where De Rochemont and director Henry Hathaway exercised the greatest calculation was in the choice of the variegated Mittel Europa types that comprise the lower echelons of the spy ring. Except for Signe Hasso, the Swedish actress, and Leo G. Carroll, the English character actor, who played the top villains, the roles of spies and traitors were mostly undertaken by lesser-known players. Through years of alliance with Russia, Hoover remained distrustful, actively and successfully lobbying to prevent a Soviet study force from inspecting American security methods from too close. It's hard to determine the subversive strain of the conspiracy in *THE HOUSE ON 92ND STREET*. In retrospect, one feels that the real target of the film is less the vanquished Nazi than the Communist infiltrator; with a few word changes in the soundtrack the picture could have been re-released during the Cold War.

In 1945, there was such a general congratulatory mood about the Bureau's wartime performance that Hoover obviously had no misgivings about disclosing for the first time the wiretapping and surveillance techniques that had served him so well in obtaining evidence against suspects and foes. The picture reveals the paraphernalia of counterespionage: two-way mirrors, hidden cameras and microphones, camouflaged vehicles, microphotography detection. The most impressive memory bank in the world, the Fingerprint Collection, is displayed in all its awesome efficiency. During the war, the Bureau had intensified the drive to fingerprint every adult American in the name of national security—an Orwellian ambition of Hoover's that had raised quite a few liberal eyebrows and was considered by some as a significant step toward a police state. Basking in the first summer of peace in four years (the film was premiered in Washington in September, a month after the end of the war), the American public was ready to grant that such extreme security methods were necessary, even desirable.

History hyped up what was basically a contest of technologies between the briskly fanatical Nazis and the no less fanatic but much more relaxed Federal agents. Bill Dietrich (Eythe), graduates from the Pension Klomstock, the famous Hamburg school for saboteurs and spies, then returns to the United States with orders to set up a secret radio station in an isolated coastal spot in Long Island.

He is, we learn from the start, a loyal American of German ancestry, and an undercover agent for the FBI with a direct line to Inspector Briggs (Nolan). Hathaway's way with action keeps the story taut, even when most of the violence is muted and covert by usual Hollywood standards—rather in the vein exploited much later by John Le Carré, but without any feeling for the drudgery of espionage. And there is a final fictional flourish, when the Federal agents close in on the house on 92nd Street, a fashion shop that serves as a front for the ring headquarters, and the modiste (Signe Hasso) is revealed to be "Mr. Christopher," whom we have glimpsed as a blurry, elusive figure through the film and identified as the mastermind/executioner of the spy operation. The Spillanesque scene in which Hasso removes her elegant woman's wig and stands before her mirror, a bizarre androgyny, is a peculiarly perverse twist that muddles the unimaginative blacks and whites of reportage.

The war, which all but consecrated the image of the G-Man, had also defused that of the gangster's. In March 1945, two months before V-E day, a small-budget, drab-looking picture on the life of John Dillinger, then dead for eleven years and a Depression icon, was released without raising the feeblest objection from the Hays Office. *DILLINGER* surprised the industry by breaking records all over the country, New York included, and making a tidy profit for the producers, the King Brothers, who had started their careers as bootleggers and had finally entered legitimate film production in the late Thirties. They had taken a chance on a crime film that risked not getting the seal of approval; commissioned an episodic, semi-factual screenplay from Philip Yordan; and hired Max Nosseck, a Polish-born director who resisted temptations to glorify and embellish which would have felled an American. Dillinger was portrayed by Lawrence Tierney, a solid young actor who plays him as a hard-as-nails psychopath—even when most photographs showed the real-life Dillinger as a personable man with a lopsided grin similar to Clark Gable's.

The film makes no mention of Mel Purvis or, for that matter, of anyone other than Dillinger who might certifiably have existed. "There seems to be not a sequence in which somebody hasn't a rod in his hand and scarcely a setting which is not a plundered bank, a jail, a gangland hideout or a scorching highway chase," wrote the film reviewer of *PM Magazine*. *DILLINGER* effectively distills the genre to its bare essentials, which, after years of large-scale mayhem and destruction, becomes a curious affirmation of a traditional way of life and death. ❀

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