The controversy stirred up by Raoul Walsh’s classic gangster film, “White Heat”—starring James Cagney as the deranged killer Cody Jarrett, American cinema’s most notorious psychopathic and deranged urban outlaw—was exactly what the director loved: fiction that made waves. This was the reason he made movies: for Walsh, controversy was good drama, therefore, good storytelling.

Yet when American moviegoers saw Cody Jarrett’s capacity for murder without remorse, not everyone was pleased. Even though “White Heat” was a box-office hit when it reached theaters in September 1949, Jarrett was a disturbance of the first order that no one saw coming. So too was the movie itself, a vortex for post-war American angst that proved anything but comforting, that reminded moviegoers that trauma from World War II was a long way from healing. With a script by Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts (from a story by Virginia Kellogg) that could have been ripped from the pages of Freud’s The Interpretation of Dreams, the film unleashed the image of a terrifying, unruly force of psychological chaos. Cody Jarrett was (and remains) troubled enough to embrace all the collective cultural angst that Americans felt after World War II. He has a mother fixation that is the mother of all mother fixations. In between cold-blooded killings, he climbs onto his mother’s lap to cool down from his latest emotional meltdown. With this, he reminded audiences (as if they had forgotten) the lesson of war and its aftermath: war was such a disturbance and rupture of culture that, in its aftermath, all kinds of monsters from the id could bubble up to the surface. And the atomic bomb was on the horizon.

With its dark and gritty take on the life of a small-time mobster, “White Heat” sits on the edge of two genres, the gangster film and a film noir tale. Walsh gets the feel of the urban jungle down pat: the war going on inside his protagonist’s head is but a metaphor for the ugliness of the people and the landscape outside. Cody Jarrett (Cagney), the leader of a gang of robbers, is tough and menacing on the outside but psychologically frail and ready to crumble on the inside. His one true love—and one true downfall—is his mother, Ma Jarrett (Margaret Wycherly), more ruthless than her son and the true leader of Cody’s gang. To say that he is pathologically attached to her is to say a mouthful, especially after he gets one of his debilitating headaches and gets nutty and Ma comforts him back to reality. The other woman in his life, his wife, Verna (Virginia
Marilyn Ann Moss, a film historian, is the author of two well-received director biographies: Raoul Walsh: The True Adventures of Hollywood’s Legendary Director (2011) and Giant: George Stevens, A Life on Film (2004). She has just completed a documentary on Raoul Walsh: The True Adventures of Raoul Walsh: Hollywood’s Legendary Director. She holds a Ph.D in literature and film from the University of California and was a film and television critic for The Hollywood Reporter from 1995 to 2003. She also has co-curated retrospectives and spoken on Walsh at UCLA, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and at Turner Classic Movies’ Film Festival in Hollywood.