

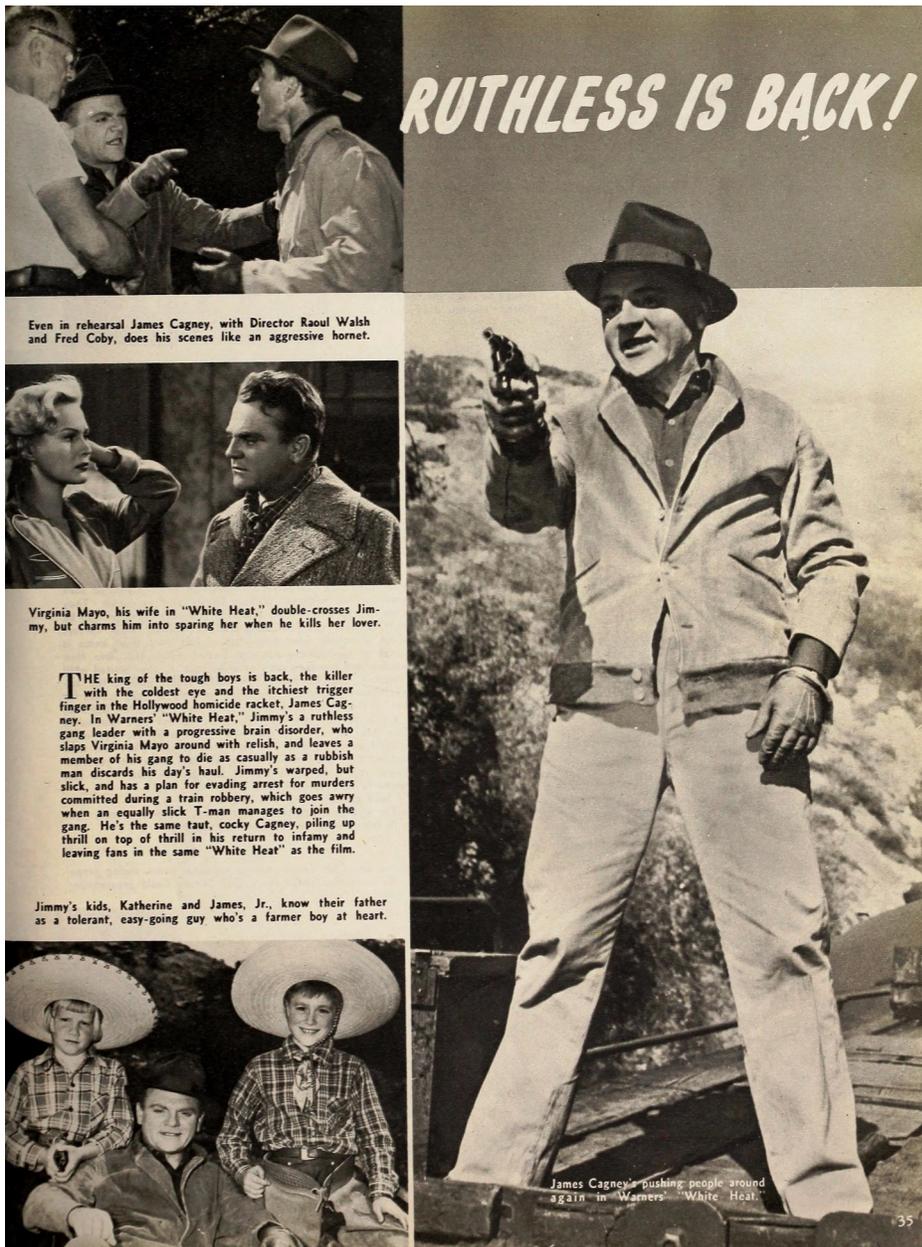
White Heat

By Marilyn Ann Moss

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



Even in rehearsal James Cagney, with Director Raoul Walsh and Fred Coby, does his scenes like an aggressive hornet.

Virginia Mayo, his wife in "White Heat," double-crosses Jimmy, but charms him into sparing her when he kills her lover.

THE king of the tough boys is back, the killer with the coldest eye and the itchiest trigger finger in the Hollywood homicide racket, James Cagney. In Warners' "White Heat," Jimmy's a ruthless gang leader with a progressive brain disorder, who slaps Virginia Mayo around with relish, and leaves a member of his gang to die as casually as a rubbish man discards his day's haul. Jimmy's warped, but slick, and has a plan for evading arrest for murders committed during a train robbery, which goes awry when an equally slick T-man manages to join the gang. He's the same taut, cocky Cagney, piling up thrill on top of thrill in his return to infamy and leaving fans in the same "White Heat" as the film.

Jimmy's kids, Katherine and James, Jr., know their father as a tolerant, easy-going guy who's a farmer boy at heart.

James Cagney's pushing people around again in Warners' "White Heat."

A pictorial in the November 1949 issue of *Screenland* features scenes from the film and declares "Ruthless Is Back!" as it describes James Cagney's depiction of outlaw Cody Jarrett. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

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

Mayo), is a beautiful dame who is crazier about money than she is about Cody and who is ready to betray him at the drop of a fur coat.

After pulling off a train robbery with his unlucky band of thugs, Cody avoids a federal rap by pleading to a lesser state robbery and goes to the pen, where he can run his gang with no trouble. But the Feds are still on to him, and the undercover cop Hank Fallon (Edmond O'Brien) poses as another prisoner to get close to him. Once Fallon gets Cody's confidence, he is in. The great prison scene occurs when Cody learns of Ma's death; he goes berserk and jumps all over the mess hall tables as if he were an animal in the throes of death. But he survives, and when he gets his release from prison, Fallon is right there beside him. The two return to the gang as Cody makes plans to pull off his biggest heist yet—he and his gang will stow away inside a gas truck to get inside a chemical plant and rob it. Instead, Fallon turns on him, and Cody runs amok in the plant trying to escape (or does he really intend to escape?). He gets nuttier by the minute, puffed up by some fantasy that he will get to the top of the world just as Ma promised he would.

The last thing Jack Warner wanted in mid-1949 was to see James Cagney ("that little bastard," as he referred to him) back on his studio lot. For Cagney, the feeling was mutual—even after winning the Best Actor Oscar in Warners' "Yankee Doodle Dandy" in 1942. Not only did Cagney not want to return to gangster parts; he never forgot the contract hell Warner had put him through since the early 1930s. He could speak some Yiddish from his childhood years, but it never sang in Jack Warner's ears as Walsh's did. Yet Goff and Roberts were adamant about Cagney playing the part of Cody Jarrett, and in the end, the prospect of big box-office returns, and Cagney's return as the ultimate tough guy, was too much for everyone to ignore. Fighting ceased, Cagney returned to the lot and history was made.

Walsh began shooting on May 6, 1949, finishing six weeks later, on June 20. He made use of various southern California locations, first going to the Santa Susana Mountains, near his home, for chase scenes, then on to an old Southern Pacific railroad tunnel and train to stage the opening robbery scenes. The hideaway lodge sequences were shot on the Warner Bros. ranch, the interior scenes in the studio itself, and the climax at a plant near Torrance, south of Los Angeles.

Walsh's personal touches go beyond the script. When the gang hides out in their cabin just after their early train heist, as Cody's debilitating headache comes on, he falls from his chair, and the .45 he's cleaning drops and goes off, causing everyone in the room to panic and scatter. The gunshot was Walsh's idea—it is not in the script. Also Walsh's improvisation is Verna's leg swing as she gets up out of the bed just minutes earlier. She bares enough of her upper thighs in the movement to make anyone wonder how Walsh got that one past the censors. When Verna tells Cody that Ma went to buy strawberries for her "boy," the script simply has him giving her a seething look. But Walsh has him actually knock her off the chair she is standing on, causing her to fall onto the bed.

At the film's conclusion, Walsh blows Cody to bits in as big an explosion as he can imagine. He wanted to go crazy because with Cagney he could. He could tweak and wreak havoc because Cagney was just the physical actor Walsh needed in a story where fast popping bullets set the rhythm. Cagney's face and body move in perpetual motion. His angst can run amok in the midst of Walsh's fast-paced action—until Cody is so dangerous, so on the loose, he's a force only psychoanalysis (or an explosion) knows how to fix. Like the A-bomb that might have made him, he's a wrath of chemicals on his way to destruction. And the bullet rhythm emanates, not from the script but from Walsh's pure enthusiasm for this story. It's his last great action story at Warners, and the film's car chases, crackling exchanges between fast-talking characters, and sleek, economical set-ups that move quickly are extensions of his almost organic responses to his fiery material. Walsh later claimed it was the best material he'd ever directed. He was right about that.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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 2009. 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.