

Gun Crazy

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"The B List: The National Society of Film Critics on the Low-Budget Beauties, Genre-Bending Mavericks, and Cult Classics We Love"

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If you had to select a single film to justify the present enthusiasm for film noir and define its allure, few movies could compete with "Gun Crazy." The same goes for celebrating the potential of B-movies to achieve grade-A flair, excitement, and artistic intelligence. The picture taps brazenly into a sexual, almost feral energy that makes it unique, even in a school of film known for perverse psychology and smoldering subtexts. And it achieves its ends on an observably limited budget, via two strategies that ought to clash but instead invigorate each other: the bold stylization of expressionistic, verging-on-minimalist settings, and the camera's embrace of the real world in adventurous, sustained takes that approach documentary realism ... except that the keynote of documentaries is rarely frenzy.

The premise is elemental. Bart Tare, an orphaned boy in a small American town, has an obsession with guns—owning them, touching them, and especially shooting them with proficiency, which makes him "feel awful good inside, like I'm somebody." Following several years in reform school and four more in the Army, Bart the man (John Dall) comes home an earnestly pleasant young fellow, albeit with his obsession intact. When he crosses paths with Annie Laurie Starr (Peggy Cummins), a carnival trick-shooter who happens to be, in the words of her spier boss, "soooo appealing, soooo dangerous, soooo lovely to look at," no power on earth could keep them out of each other's arms. What Bart doesn't know till much later is that Laurie once killed a man ("Gun Crazy" initially was released under the title "Deadly Is the Female"), and before long she has persuaded him to join her in a cross-country crime spree that also plays like an extended honeymoon.

From the outset, the film is galvanized with an electricity we aren't always privy to. The main title plays over an empty street corner at night, with a neon sign or two and a silver wash of rain. As the credits end, Bart (played at this preadolescent stage by Rusty Tamblyn) rounds the corner, pauses, then advances across the street toward the camera. The camera obligingly backs off, and we real-



John Dall restrains Peggy Cummins
Courtesy Library of Congress

ize that all this time we have been looking out the window of a gun store—been inside Bart's gun craziness, as it were. After gazing raptly for a moment, Bart smashes the glass, then turns his back, his arms spread across the hole in the window as if he could conceal what he's done. Turning again, he reaches in to seize a pistol, then spins around to flee. But he trips and falls on his face, his prize skittering away through the puddles—virtually swept along by the camera to stop at the feet of the town sheriff. Extreme low-angle looking up at this towering figure, then cut to a camera moving along near ground level to frame a close-up of the boy. But instead of a conventionally centered close-up, the composition crowds Bart's face into the lower left-hand corner of the frame, almost off the screen. After a moment, the focus ebbs away and the scene ends.

A great deal of "Gun Crazy"'s logic and dynamism is set up here. The normal world can take on a hallucinatory quality—albeit expressed in acceptably naturalistic terms—in sympathy with Bart's state of mind. The camera is attentive, responsive to Bart's assertive behavior; but it's also susceptible to quicksilver changes, can turn almost predatory in catching him at a disadvantage. The strategy of pinning Bart ultracloseup in a corner of the frame will recur at key moments, an acute visual index of his distress and impotence, but also a kind of milestone measuring a fatal progression, a pattern, outside Bart's ken. And the ebbing away of focus never operates merely as an alternative to a fadeout or soft cut; there's always an expressive overtone to it, a sense of shame, or loss of power, or orgasmic release.

“Gun Crazy” was directed by Joseph H. Lewis, who had come up from the editing bench to helm an El Cheapo medley of Bowery Boys comedies, program Westerns, and Bela Lugosi vehicles, then scored with an authentic noir sleeper, the 1945 “My Name Is Julia Ross.” (Lewis would go on to direct one of the most corrosive entries in the classic noir cycle, “The Big Combo,” in 1955.) Even the least and/or most preposterous of his low-rent assignments contained an ambitious deep-focus composition or eccentric use of a character player to relieve the surrounding flatness and give a glimpse of a lively directorial intelligence. Yet nothing anticipates the wall-to-wall resourcefulness and stylistic commitment displayed in “Gun Crazy.”

Take that carny introduction of Annie Laurie Starr. She enters with guns blazing, literally, and because the camera is looking up as though from the point of view of someone in the carnival audience—Bart, say, who’s been brought along by his boyhood chums for a homecoming celebration—the guns and then Laurie herself rise into the frame. Brief cut to Bart grinning, then back to Laurie, who twinklingly registers his gaze, returns it, and ... points a gun at him and fires! Bart, of course, grins all the brighter.

Like Buñuel’s razor across the eye in “Un Chien andalou,” that moment never fails to astonish. Besides rendering superfluous any sober essay on the relationship between gun power and sexuality, the scene is a classic example of how, if only a director puts his camera in the right place, at the right distance and angle, all manner of additional values and valences can blossom. The whole erectile, rising-into-view nature of Laurie’s entrance is a natural function of someone walking from the back of a stage to the front; forward motion becomes vertical thrust only within the selective frame of a camera. Lewis also had the cunning not to make the camera’s eye precisely synonymous with Bart’s. Laurie is looking—and firing her blank shot—just past the camera, not directly into our eyes; like Bart’s pals sitting beside him, we’re close enough to appreciate Laurie’s audacity and its impact on Bart, but this is strictly between the two of them. Still, we can enjoy the contact high.

Actually, you can get a contact high off the movie in general. Everything seems freshly seen, unexpected: throwaway details like the breathy exhilaration of Bart’s older sister Ruby taking a phone call from her brother (Lewis had the actress, Anabel Shaw, run around the soundstage for a couple of minutes just before the take); or the late-night goofiness of the moment when a nameless cook in a greasy-spoon diner dismissively turns away

from the distant figures of Bart and Laurie, takes a swig of bad coffee, and favors us with a sardonic grimace. There’s always an extra dimension to things.

But Lewis’s greatest coups are, again, integral to the movie’s action and how he films it. When Bart goes up onto the carnival stage to try outshooting Laurie, the camera follows each of them up stage and down as they trade places (she lights matches over his head, he lights matches over hers). Given the aura of competition, attraction, and sexual energy, the camera movements not only build suspense but eroticize the space the two are traversing. The strategy is soon echoed in the claustrophobic scene in Laurie’s trailer when Bart replaces the carny owner (Berry Kroeger) as the man in Laurie’s life. And in a kind of aesthetic sense memory, the eroticism attaches to another scene a few minutes later when Bart and Laurie, having committed their first holdup, back out of the scene: the camera advances, as if fearful of being left behind. Or maybe that’s just us.

The tour-de-force for which “Gun Crazy” is most famous is a bank-robbery scene near the midpoint. The camera is planted in the backseat of a car the couple has just stolen. Laurie is driving; Bart—dressed in the showbiz cowboy garb he wore during his own brief turn as a carny—will be getting out to go in and commit the robbery. As they wind through several blocks’ worth of the small town of Hampton on a busy Saturday morning, the actors seem as much on the spot as their characters: they know the whole scene must play out in a single take of several minutes’ duration, including perhaps some improvised dialogue. And so it does, with only the adjustment of the camera swinging to aim through a window when Laurie has to climb out onto the sidewalk and chat up the cop who’s ambled into view just after Bart’s entered the bank. The shot continues through the sounding of the alarm, Bart’s running out, Laurie’s pistol-whipping of the cop, and a rushing getaway with Bart at the wheel. And still the shot holds, with Laurie now crowded up against Bart and looking back, ostensibly watching for the police cars whose sirens we begin to hear, but really just burning with lust for the moment. The camera can’t just sit there; it moves closer to the glow in her eyes ... and then settles back again, satisfied, as the car surges away. Up the road.

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Richard T. Jameson’s essays and reviews have appeared in Straight Shooting, “Queen Anne & Magnolia News,” “Film Comment,” Mr. Showbiz, and Parallax View.