

# White Heat (1949) Raoul Walsh

P Michell, 2014

## Introduction:

One of the last of the iconic Gangster films that was popularised by the studio Warner Bros.

Considered to be one of Cagney's best roles.

Cody Jarrett has an extreme Oedipus complex.

Extreme violence (for the day) – eg: scalding steam disfigurement.

Police in detecting the gang use 'modern technology' of the day.

Cagney's physical dynamism interpreted in the gangster films of the thirties as necessary ruthlessness in getting to the top. Post war gangster films show him as psychotic.

Touchstone of 'normality' is the mother. Later 'friend' takes on this role.

Influenced by film noir & documentary styles.

Whilst its about the planning and execution of a big robbery – this remained secondary to examination of character, obsession and evocation of mood.

**James Cagney** – 69 films - Cody Jarrett - with Edward G Robinson made the gangster movie genre their own. Significant Cagney gangster films – Public Enemy (1931), G Men (1935), Angels with Dirty Faces (1938), Roaring Twenties (1939), Each Dawn I Die (1939). Yet never won an Oscar for this genre.

One of Hollywood's preeminent male stars of all time (eclipsed, perhaps, only by "King" [Clark Gable](#) and arguably by [Gary Cooper](#) or [Spencer Tracy](#)), and the cinema's quintessential "tough guy".

## Trivia:

According to [James Cagney's](#) autobiography *Cagney By Cagney*, (1976, and ghost written by show biz biographer Jack McCabe), a Mafia plan to murder Cagney by dropping a several hundred pound klieg light (big light used in studios) on top of him was stopped at the insistence of [George Raft](#). Cagney at that time was president of the Screen Actors Guild, and was determined not to let the mob infiltrate the industry. [Raft used his many mob connections to cancel the hit.](#)

Music connections - Inspiration for the Madonna song, "White Heat", from her album, True Blue. Along with [Rita Hayworth](#), is mentioned by name in the [Tom Waits](#) song "Invitation To The Blues".

Salary - In 1931 Cagney was earning around \$500 / week. By 1936 was getting \$100,000 / picture. For *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) was getting \$12,500 / week.

Director - **Raoul Walsh** – 138 films (1914 – 1964 active period):

Raoul Walsh would continue to be a top director for 40 years and would not hang up his director's megaphone (if he still had one at that late in the game) until 1964. As a writer, his last script was made in 1970, meaning his career as a whole spanned seven decades and 58 years. He introduced the world to [John Wayne](#) in [The Big Trail](#) (1930) in 70mm wide-screen in 1930. It would take nine more years and [John Ford](#) to make the Duke a star. In one three-year period at Warner Bros., he directed [The Roaring Twenties](#) (1939), [They Drive by Night](#) (1940), [High Sierra](#) (1941), [The Strawberry Blonde](#) (1941), [Manpower](#) (1941), [They Died with Their Boots On](#) (1941), and [Gentleman Jim](#) (1942), among other films in that time frame. He helped consolidate the stardom of [Humphrey Bogart](#) and [Errol Flynn](#) while directing the great [James Cagney](#) in one of his more delightful films, [The Strawberry Blonde](#) (1941). This was the same director that would elicit Cagney's most searing performance since [The Public Enemy](#) (1931) in the crime classic [White Heat](#) (1949).

#### From Senses of Cinema:

Graham Daseler reviewing 'Raoul Walsh: The True Adventures of Hollywood's Legendary Director by Marilyn Ann Moss. (2011)

If Walsh's years at Warner Bros., the studio where he worked from 1939 to 1951, shine brighter than the rest that is because he was that rare breed of director who genuinely loved the studio system. He even said that he preferred it when the studio dropped a script off on his lawn the morning after he finished shooting the last one, a joke that didn't stray far from the truth. Critics today often damn the studio system for being factory-like, the implication being that it replaced creativity with simple drudgery, but Walsh reminds us that some artists do their best work when they're toiling on an assembly line. In his years at Warners, he directed, or had a hand in directing, over 30 pictures. (By comparison, in the same period, Preston Sturges, no slouch himself, helmed a measly dozen.) But what pictures! If you want to see the gangster film at its glorious peak, look no further than *The Roaring Twenties*, his gritty tale of Prohibition bootlegging and murder. Or, if that's not your brand of whiskey, try *Pursued* (1947), his strange but delectable mixture of western and film noir. In *Objective, Burma!* he made a grizzled soldier out of Errol Flynn, no mean feat, and in *High Sierra* he made a star of Humphrey Bogart, shaping his persona for a decade to come. Walsh's protean nature made him suitable for almost any project, and the studio, accordingly, worked him hard. Warner Bros. may have made Walsh but it was Walsh who defined Warner Bros.

Yet if his years at Warners revealed his manifold talents, so too did they reveal his limits. Like the vast majority of directors of his generation, Walsh didn't write his own films, leaving the penning of his projects to men more suited to the vocation. At Warners, this was no handicap, for the studio in the 1940s had one of the finest stables of screenwriters in the business – Jerry Wald, John Huston, Robert Buckner, Ivan Goff, the Epstein twins, and William Faulkner, among other thoroughbreds – and the results are palpable:

Verna: *I'd look good in a mink coat, honey.*  
Cody Jarrett: *You'd look good in a shower curtain.*  
- *White Heat*

**Music - Max Steiner.** Composer - 241 films. (Conducted another 100 more!) Austrian composer who achieved legendary status as the creator of hundreds of classic American film scores. As a child he was astonishingly musically gifted, composing complex works as a teenager and completing the course of study at Vienna's Hochschule fuer Musik und Darstellende Kunst in only one year, at the age of sixteen. He studied under [Gustav Mahler](#) and, before the age of twenty, made his living as a conductor and as composer of works for the theater, the concert hall, and vaudeville. After a brief sojourn in Britain, Steiner moved to the USA in the same wave as fellow film composer [Erich Wolfgang Korngold](#) and quickly became a sought-after orchestrator and conductor on Broadway, bringing the Western classical tradition in which he had been raised to mainstream audiences. Was regarded as the quintessential pioneer of American film composition, noted especially for his ability to integrate his music with the action on screen. Nominated for 24 academy awards - won 3.

As a boy, Steiner was given piano instruction by legendary composer [Johannes Brahms](#). Steiner's father was a major theatrical producer in Vienna, who had discovered and promoted Brahms, and the two remained great friends.

When he was 15, he won a medal for completing an eight year music course in one year at the Imperial Academy of Music in Vienna. His teacher of conducting was Gustav Mahler.

Richard Strauss was Steiner's godfather.

Steiner was extremely prodigious, composing 111 scores for RKO alone during his tenure as musical director between 1929 and 1935. From 1936 to 1965, he worked under contract at Warner Brothers, except for brief spells on loan to David O. Selznick.

Works include: *Gone With the Wind* (1939), *Casablanca* (1942), *Top Hat* (1935), *Night and Day* (1946), *Hawaiian Eye* (1959-1963 TV series), *Glass Mebagerie* (1950), *The Fountainhead* (1949), *Key Largo* (1948), *Johnny Belinda* (1948), *The Big Sleep* (1946), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *King Kong* (1933), etc.

Wrote many fanfares eg: Warner Brothers "Tovarich Fanfare".

Editor – **Owen Marks** – 96 films. Entire career at Warner Bros. *Casablanca* (1942), *Treasure of Sierra Madre* (1948), *East of Eden* (1955).

Cinematographer – **Sidney (Sid) Hickcox**. 163 films. Hickox was best known as an action photographer, who excelled shooting the gritty, moody crime films and melodramas, in which Warners tended to corner the market. He collaborated particularly well with another action specialist, the director [Raoul Walsh](#). Hickox had the uncanny ability to make productions, shot on a modest budget, look a lot classier. His best films cover the period from 1942 to 1954. They include the boxing drama [Gentleman Jim](#) (1942); the films noir [To Have and Have Not](#) (1944), [The Big Sleep](#) (1946), [Dark Passage](#) (1947) and [White Heat](#) (1949); and, finally, the sci-fi cult classic [Them!](#) (1954).

**Ivan Goff & Ben Roberts** – Writers: Goff an Australian. Pair wrote together for 39 years. Mostly TV series including Charlie’s Angels. Original story by Virginia Kellogg.

Support cast:

**Edmond O’Brien** – Hank Vallon / Vic Pardo – 119 films. Popular ‘B’ actor. Learned the craft of performance as a magician, reportedly tutored by neighbor [Harry Houdini](#). Worked with another magician, [Orson Welles](#), in the Mercury Theater's production of "Julius Caesar", appearing as "Mark Antony". He would later play "Casca" in [Joseph L. Mankiewicz's](#) film of the play, [Julius Caesar](#) (1953).

O'Brien was originally cast as the photo-journalist Jackson Bentley (based on [Lowell Thomas](#)) in [Lawrence of Arabia](#) (1962). After O'Brien filmed several scenes, he suffered a heart attack and had to drop out of the picture. He was replaced by [Arthur Kennedy](#).

Quote: “Versatility is a dangerous thing. It's very satisfying to portray many types of roles, but often your own identity gets lost. Seldom does a producer say, "This is an Eddie O'Brien part." On the other hand, while the rewards may be great in fame and financially for stars, the work becomes monotonous. No actor who plays himself is a happy person.”

**Virginia Mayo** – Verna Jarret (Cagney’s Wife) - 69 films - She got some of the best reviews of her career in [James Cagney's](#) return to the gangster genre, [White Heat](#) (1949), as Verna, the scheming, cheating wife of homicidal killer Cody Jarrett (Cagney). Was a member of St Louis Municipal Opera. Became famous for her role in Danny Kaye’s [Secret Life of Walter Mitty](#) (1947) and appeared in other films of his as well. Known as well for [The Best Years of Our Lives](#) (1946)

**Margaret Wycherly** – Ma Jarrett – 31 films - British actress, born in 1881, is probably best remembered as the mother in her two best-known roles, [Sergeant York](#) (1941) opposite 'Gary Cooper' and [White Heat](#) (1949) opposite [James Cagney](#) who closes out the film screaming "Made it, Ma! Top of the world!" as he goes to a fiery death. Margaret spent her early acting days on stage touring across England, and later working with stock theatre companies in the US, before making the jump to Broadway. There she starred in two memorable plays, [Tobacco Road](#), a successful

commercial play, and *The Thirteenth Chair* which proved to be a critical success. Her performances caught the attention of the studios and she wound up reprising her role in the *The Thirteenth Chair* (1929) film adaptation opposite [Bela Lugosi](#). Returning to the stage, she periodically returned to Hollywood, making the film *Midnight* (1934). The most notable being *Sergeant York* (1941) for which she earned an Oscar nomination for best supporting actress. Other films iconic films include - *The Yearling* (1946) and *Forever Amber* (1947).

### **Trivia:**

Cagney's last great gangster film. Made when he was fifty.

If the surprise expressed by [James Cagney's](#) fellow inmates during "the telephone game" scene in the prison dining room appears real, it's because it is. Director [Raoul Walsh](#) didn't tell the rest of the cast what was about to happen, so Cagney's outburst caught them by surprise. In fact, Walsh himself didn't know what Cagney had planned; the scene as written wasn't working, and Cagney had an idea. He told Walsh to put the two biggest extras playing cons in the mess-hall next to him on the bench (he used their shoulders to boost himself onto the table) and to keep the cameras rolling no matter what.

At the time of filming of *White Heat* (1949), Special Effects were not yet using squibs (tiny explosives that simulate the effects of bullets). The producers employed skilled marksmen who used low velocity bullets to break windows or show bullets hitting near the characters. In the factory scene, [James Cagney](#) was missed by mere inches.

Held the record for largest number of camera set ups in one scene; for the scene in prison mess hall where Cody Jarrett finds out his mother is dead.

Margaret Wycherely, who plays the mother, often played in Shakespeare plays.

### **Overview:**

by John Greco from [twentyfourframes.wordpress.com](http://twentyfourframes.wordpress.com)

When James Cagney returned to the gangster role in "White Heat", the film exploded off the screen, just as it still does today. As Eddie Mueller points out in "Dark City" Cody is not a classic gangster but an outlaw and that is an important difference. Arthur "Cody" Jarrett was not a victim of growing up on the poor side of town, like Tom Powers in "The Public Enemy" or a war veteran returning home to depression era high unemployment, as Eddie Bartlett did in "The Roaring Twenties." Nor was Cody part of a criminal organization. Jarrett instead is a cruel, psychotic, homicidal, maniacal mamma's boy, a brother to Richard Widmark's Tommy Udo, Lawrence Tierney's Sam Wild and a father to Al Pacino's Tony Montana along other post war psychotic criminals. Whether he shoots holes into the trunk of his car "to give some air" to fellow prison escapee Parker, who attempted to kill Jarrett in prison, or shoots Big Ed (Steve Cochran) and gleefully kicks him down the stairs

telling his boys to catch, Cody is cruelly vicious and unstable. As portrayed by Cagney, he is magnetic, one of the great performances of all time; you just cannot take your eyes off him.

The film opens with Cody's gang robbing a train setting the stage for his behavior of showing no mercy to his victims or fellow gang members. One of his men is badly burned by hot steam from the train, Days later; Cody leaves him behind when the gang has to make a getaway from their hideout. He actually, tells another member of the gang, Cotton (Wally Cassell), to kill him, "since they were close friends." Cotton instead shoots off a few rounds into the ceiling so Cody and the others waiting outside the mountain cabin think he did kill him. He may as well of shot him because when discovered by the police, the guy had frozen to death.

Even Cody's sultry two-timing wife Verna, (Virginia Mayo) does not escape Cody's brutality. His treatment of his wife, who he kicks off a small bench, is reminiscent of, and as shocking as the grapefruit smashed into Mae Clarke's face in "The Public Enemy." When Cody concocts a plan to avoid a federal rap by pleading to a lesser State robbery with probably a two-year sentence, Verna says what is she going to do for two years waiting for him. Ma responds "the same thing you did before you married him, dearie." Cody replies, "You better not!" the insinuation clear that Verna was walking the streets.

Of course, Cody saves his love for Ma (Margaret Wycherly). Cody cares for no one like he does for his mother who is as cold blooded and vicious as her son. Along with Norman Bates, Cody is cinema's poster boy for the Oedipus complex. When he gets the first in a series of extreme blinding headaches, his mother takes cares of him and Cody ends up sitting in Ma's lap. Yes, there is no love like the love of a good mother. It is Ma's death, (unknown to Cody, Verna shot her in the back, she later convinces Cody that Big Ed murdered her) that causes Cody to go berserk in the prison mess hall and eventually plan an escape.

Cody's downfall turns out to be a trust issue. Other than Ma, Cody never trusted anyone until he met Nick Fallon (Edmond O'Brien) who is really federal agent Vic Pardo, a plant inside the prison where he first meets Cody. Gaining Cody's confidence, Fallon is in on the prison break and the eventually explosive ending at a chemical plant.

The ending is one of the most famous in cinema history, always included in historical and retrospective clips. Trapped, on top of a gas storage tank, his gang members are all killed, either by the police or by his own gun, Cody is wounded three times by Fallon, using a high-powered rifle. Insane, shooting wildly with his pistol, Cody screams, "Made it Ma, top of the world!" and a split second later, the world explodes into a fiery ball of white heat.

Based on a story by Virginia Kellogg and credited as being based on the true-life

story of Arthur “Doc” Barker and his mother Ma Barker. Kellogg was also responsible for the story and screenplay of the early women in prison film “Caged.” The screenplay was written by Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts. While Cagney ignites the screen with one of the most iconic performances in film, there are some other fine performances, particularly by Virginia Mayo as Verna, beautifully slutty and low class. Director Raoul Walsh provides both Mayo and Cagney with some nice small bits of business that enhance the characterizations, for example, when we first see Verna she is sound asleep snoring. Later, she spits out some gum just before kissing Cody. When Jarrett is shooting holes in the trunk to give Parker “a little air”, he is eating a chicken wing. These fragments give us insight into both Verna and Cody, her lack of class and his indifference to killing. Steve Cochran is exceptionally menacing and rat like as Big Ed and noted Shakespearian actress Margaret Wycherley is wonderful as Cody’s equally obsessive and psycho mother. By the way, Wycherley in Howard Hawks Sgt. York portrayed Gary Cooper’s mother, one that was at the opposite end of the spectrum.

The film opened on Broadway at the colossal Strand Theater in New York, which contained over 2,700 seats, to generally rave reviews including the New York Times that stated, “*the Warners have pulled all the stops in making this picture the acme of the gangster-prison film.*” Times critic, Bosley Crowthers, always known for “changing” his mind, changed his opinion of the film, a week or so later, from its original rave review when conservative elements attacked the film for its innate violence. Cagney came to hate the film, as it became more and more of a classic, abhorring the crazed loser who became one of his most identifiable characterizations. While Cagney would go on to play a few more criminal types in the remaining years of his career, the role of Cody Jarrett would be the last iconic hoodlum in a long and amazing career of classic gangster/outlaw roles.

The film has taken on legendary status imitated, paid homage to in any number of works including 1980’s “Fade to Black”, “Naked Gun 33 1/3” and “Johnny Dangerously.

## **Reviews:**

[A classic drama and a classic psychological study](#)  
[nickjg](#) from London, England  
25 January 2004

Cagney's ability to shock is constant and each new gangster he creates shows a new facet of the psychopathic mind. White heat is the perfect antidote to the earlier movies- the structure where good triumphs in the last reel is still there but the killer, out of control is far less romanticised- if only current directors could develop this message. Cody Jarrett is the product of an over protective mother and thug father in the classic pattern. His whole view of the world is simplistic without subtlety or

shade. Like all people of his type his self-confidence betrays him because he sees other people as stereotypes and while he has insight into the sorts of people who form his support network, he, very unwisely, dismisses the intelligence of the opposition. Like all gangsters, he has very little grasp of the outside world- throughout the film he is trapped in boxes, just like the man he kills in the boot of his car. Cagney's portrayal is his greatest role- his avoidance of pathos and his refusal to bend emotionally mean that we are never invited to pity him- wherever there seems to be a point of access for the audience he delivers the lines with a flatness which denies us sympathy. His maudlin obsession with his mother invites us to loathe his infantile mental paralysis.

Not enough comments praise the real co-star: Margaret Wycherley. She is a sinister mother who can handle the police and the gang and Cody's wife. Her world-weary cynicism, her obsession with her son delivered in the same dead-pan style is such a total antithesis to the usual hollywood 'caring parent' model that she raises the character to the level of an Empress Livia or an Agrippina. The final scene works on multiple levels- the good-guy cannot easily destroy the villain- does the world blow up in Cody's face or are we being told that the Jarretts of the world will dominate until they bring the universe to destruction? A film which still demands analysis and does more to reveal the nature of criminal amorality than anything Tarrantino or Scorsese could produce- The latter types of director are too caught up in the 'romance' of the villainous life- they need to develop Raoul Walsh's objectivity and Cagney's penetration. It is Cagney's unequivocal hatred of the character he's portraying and the personal honesty which allows him to objectify both the character he is playing and himself as an actor that makes the whole thing work. The crude method actors we're stuck with today could learn a lot from his Cody Jarrett!

and another ...

Film Noir of the Week

<http://www.noiroftheweek.com/2011/04/white-heat-1949.html>

Cody Jarrett (Cagney) is the sadistic leader of a violent and ruthless gang of thieves. Unnervingly devoted to his mother (Wycherly) and afflicted by terrible headaches since childhood, Cody is one bad day away from being a full blown psychotic. That day is coming soon, and everyone in his way is sure to pay.

Around the time of *White Heat* being released, two things were evident as regards its star and its themes. One is that it had been a long time since a gangster, and a truly vicious one at that, had thrilled or frightened a cinema audience. The Production Code and a change in emotional value due to World War II had seen the genuine career gangster all but disappear. Second thing of note is that Cagney was stung by the disappointing performance of Cagney Productions. So after having left Warner Brothers in 1942, the diminutive star re-signed for the studio and returned to the genre he had almost made his own in the 30s. He of course had some say in proceedings, such as urging the makers to ensure a crime does not pay motif, but all

told he needed a hit and the fit with Raoul Walsh and the psychotic Jarrett was perfect. It may not be his best acting performance, but it's certainly his most potent and arguably it's the cream of the gangster genre crop.

The inspiration for the film is mostly agreed to be the real life criminals: Ma Barker, Arthur "Doc" Barker and Francis Crowley. A point of worth being that they were all 30s criminals since *White Heat* very much looks and feels like a 30s movie. Cagney for sure is older (he was 50 at the time) and more rotund, but he and the film have the presence and vibrancy respectively to keep it suitably in period and in the process becoming the last of its kind. *White Heat* is that rare old beast that manages to have a conventional action story at its core, yet still be unique in structure and portrayal of the lead character. Neatly crafted by Walsh around four Cody Jarrett "moments" of importance, the Oedipal tones playing out between Cody and his Ma make for an uneasy experience, but even then Walsh and the team pull a rabbit out the hat by still garnering sympathy for the crazed protagonist. It sounds nutty, but it really is one of the big reasons why *White Heat* is the great film that it is. Another reason of course is "those" special scenes, two of which are folklore cinematic legends now. Note legend number 1 as Cody, incarcerated, receives bad news, the reaction is at once terrifying and pitiful (note the extras reaction here since they didn't know what was coming). Legend number 2 comes with "that" ending, forever quotable and as octane ignited finale's go it takes some beating.

As brilliant and memorable as Cagney is, it's not, however, a one man show. He's superbly directed by Walsh, with the great director maintaining a pace and rhythm to match Cody Jarrett's state of mind. And with Steiner (*Angels With Dirty Faces/Casablanca/Key Largo*) scoring with eerie strands and strains, and Hickox (*The Big Sleep/To Have and Have Not*) adding noir flourishes for realism and atmosphere, it's technically a very smart picture. The supporting cast in the face of Cagney's barnstorming come up with sterling work. Wycherly is glorious as the tough and tetchy Ma Jarrett and O'Brien is needed to be spot on in the film's second most important role; a role that calls for him to not only be the first man Cody has ever trusted, but also as some sort of weird surrogate mother! Mayo isn't called on to do much, but she's gorgeous and sexy and fatalistic in sheen. While Cochran holds his end up well as the right hand man getting ideas above his station.

*White Heat* is as tough as they come, a gritty pulsating psycho drama that has many visual delights and scenes that are still as powerful and as shocking some 60 odd years after it first hit the silver screen. What is often forgotten, when yet another clip of the brilliant ending is shown on TV, is that it's also a weird and snarky piece of film. All told, it is blisteringly hot and essential viewing for the classic movie fan.

A comment by a reader:

"A magnificent film by any standards even after sixty years. Notice how nobody has tried to remake it? Nobody would dare... Is it film noir or a gangster film? It doesn't really matter with such classy acting. Truly top of the world....."