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TORONTO FILM SOCIETY
THIRTY-SECOND SEASON
TENTH EXHIBITION MEETING
MAY 5, 1980, AT 7:30 P.M.
IN THE TOWN HALL
ST. LAWRENCE CENTRE FOR THE ARTS

Order of Programme

DU RIFIFI CHEZ LES HOMMES (Rififi)113 mins

Intermission

I SOLTI IGNOTI (Big Deal on Madonna Street) . .105 mins

Our subject this evening is the 'heist' or caper movie. The heist plays a fairly popular role in the thriller genre and tonight's two films explore this theme, albeit in quite different moods.

Before regulations were unofficially relaxed in the late sixties, the forces of censorship and assorted legions of decency ensured that crime, at least in the movies, did not pay. It was essential that the bank robber, the safecracker and the jewel thief were caught, and their ill-gotten gains returned to the rightful owners. The question put to the audience was not whether the thieves would get away with it, but how and when they would be trapped -- making the director's job of maintaining tension that much more difficult. Before going on to tonight's films, it might be worthwhile to classify some of the forms the 'heist' film has taken in cinema lore.

In one of the best of all 'heist' thrillers, John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), the actual robbery, of a jewellery store, is thrown away in a ten minute sequence in the middle of the picture. What makes the film exceptional is the range and depth of the characterization. The film was unique in the attention it gave to the mechanics of planning and executing the robbery. It became the prototype of a series of films throughout the 1950's in which a group of men from various backgrounds, some criminal, some nearly so, some respectable but all with special skills, come together for the purpose of the robbery, the rewards of which they are kept from enjoying by internal tensions and, sometimes, a malicious fate. A good example is Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956). Based on a novel by W. R. Burnett, *The Asphalt Jungle* was re-made in 1972 as *Cool Breeze* with black actors taking all the leads. Direction and script was by Barry Pollock who reduced the thieves to mere stereotypes and turned the robbery into a mistimed joke, with the crooks wearing rubber masks of Richard Nixon, Spiro Agnew and George Wallace.

Jewels and jewellery stores are favourite targets of robbers in the cinema. Dassin, himself, reworked tonight's Rififi theme in *Topkapi* (1964), about a gang of ill-assorted thieves who plan to steal a jewel-encrusted dagger from a museum in Istanbul. The actual robbery sequence is quite suspenseful but the rest of the film is comedic and a lot of fun.

Ronald Neame's *Gambit* (1966) is another 'caper' film. A likeable con-man, (Michael Caine) conceives an ingenious plan for stealing a priceless objet d'art from a Middle Eastern millionaire, enlisting the aid of a recalcitrant nightclub dancer (Shirley MacLaine). Everything goes according to plan -- because it is happening in Caine's imagination. In reality, everything goes disastrously wrong.

The excellent plot twists were provided by Alvin Sargent and Jack Davies. Peter Yates' equally flippant *The Hot Rock* (1972) takes advantage of the new moral freedom by allowing its protagonists to get away with it. The robbery is very funny -- one of the gang members (George Segal) gets trapped in the glass case protecting the jewel -- and all the performances help to create a very enjoyable piece of filmwork.

Bryan Forbes' *Deadfall* (1968), another jewel robbery piece, is written and directed in a very different vein. The thieves are an ambitious young cat-burglar (Michael Caine) and an older safe-cracker (Eric Porter), a homosexual who has lost his self-respect. The robbery sequence is, like *Rififi*'s, long and silent, but less tense, due to being tiresomely crosscut with a classical concert.

Henri Verneuil's *Le Clan des Siciliens* (The Sicilian Clan) (1969), is a much bigger affair. The thieves led by Jean Gabin and Alain Delon hijack an airplane and force it to land on a half-completed freeway near New York to get their hands on its multi-million cargo of jewellery. In addition to this excellent set piece, the film contains some inventive escape sequences. To get out of a police van, Delon cuts a hole in the floor with a circular saw; later, caught in bed with a prostitute, he swings out of the window and across the rooftops of Paris with the panache of a latter-day Douglas Fairbanks.

The bank robbery is an equally popular theme, and just as adaptable. Like the jewel robbery, it is frequently played for laughs. Basil Dearden's *League of Gentlemen* (1960), about a gang of unusually well-heeled thieves who rob a London bank, is essentially a civilized comedy, though the robbery sequence is quite tense. Bernard Girard's *Dead Heat on a Merry-Go-Round* (1967), is among other things, about the robbery of a bank at Los Angeles International Airport, planned to coincide with the visit of the Russian premier. It has a wittily ironic script by Girard and a beguiling performance by James Coburn.

Norman Jewison's *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968) is about a millionaire who robs a bank for kicks and is not so much a thriller as it is a glamorous star vehicle for Steve McQueen and Faye Dunaway, played very cool indeed. Richard Brooks' *\$ (Dollars)* (1971), set in Hamburg is also dangerously cool. Only the actual robbery -- carried out under a swivelling electronic eye -- succeeds in raising the temperature.

On a more serious level, Richard Fleischer's *Violent Saturday* (1955) is a taut and detailed account of a bank robbery in a small mining town, all the more effective because it observes the unities of time and place. The small-time thieves are well fleshed out and the atmosphere of the tightly-knit community is sympathetically recorded.

The casino, of course, makes a more glamorous target for the screen thief. In Lewis Milestone's *Ocean's 11* (1960), Frank Sinatra recruits members of his wartime commando battalion for a casino 'caper' in Las Vegas. It's all a little like one of those beer commercials one sees on television, you know -- "When Don and the boys get together for some fun and", etc, etc, and so-forth. Unimaginative but with a haunting final tracking shot. *Five Against the House* (1955) is an interesting film about four college students and a glamorous nightclub entertainer (Kim Novak) who plan to hold up a Reno gambling casino as an 'experiment'.

Henry Hathaway's *Seven Thieves* (1960) is a more imaginative variation on the casino theme. An ageing criminal (Edward G. Robinson), decides to pull off one

last coup before retiring -- raiding the casino at Cannes. The operation is superbly organized with a final ironic twist at the end of the film. Henri Verneuil's *Melodie en sous-sol* (1962, Any Number Can Win) has a similar plot. The thieves are an ageing cracksman (Jean Gabin) and his self-confident assistant (Alain Delon), and their target is, again, the Cannes casino. A bit overlong but well acted with a nice ironic twist at the end.

Sidney Lumet's *The Anderson Tapes* (1971) is a heist thriller for the present age. A master criminal, (Sean Connery), plans to rob an entire apartment block on New York's fashionable East Side, but every move made by himself and his associates is methodically filmed and taped and the details fed into computers. He does not pull it off!

Much of the above was culled from a Dutton paperback titled *The Thriller* by Brian Davis, and the complete book deals with the suspense film from 1946 to 1972. It is not all inclusive but provides a lively and provocative introduction to the title subject. Some films not detailed are the classic film, *The Killing* (1956), brilliantly directed by a then relative newcomer, Stanley Kubrick; *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), a tense bank robbery tale with Harry Belafonte, Robert Ryan and Shelley Winters, directed by Robert Wise; and two hybrids, *Grand Slam* (1967), a good Italian-French-German co-production with Edward G. Robinson, Adolfo Celi and Janet Leigh, directed by Giuliano Montaldo and, *They Came to Rob Las Vegas* (1968), a so-so Spanish-French-German-Italian co-production with Gary Lockwood, Elke Sommer, Lee J. Cobb and Jack Palance, directed by Antonio Isasi; finally, a wildly different variation of the theme, *Assault on a Queen* (1966), in which a group of con men try to pull off the biggest caper of them all, robbing the "Queen Mary" on the high seas by using a reconverted German U-boat. Directed by Jack Donahue and starring Frank Sinatra, Tony Franciosa and Virna Lisi, the film with its wide plot possibilities, is not particularly good.

I have doubtless missed a few titles and if I have passed over anyone's favourite, my apologies. As already noted, my purpose was to emphasize the classic 'heist' or 'caper' motif by selecting some examples from the silver screen, all by way of leading up to tonight's features.

DU RIFIFI CHEZ LES HOMMES (Rififi) 1955 France b/w 16mm 113 mins.

Production Companies: *Indus Films/S.N., Pathé Cinéma/Prima Film.* Director: *Jules Dassin.* Script: *Jules Dassin, René Wheeler, Auguste Le Breton, from a novel by A. Le Breton.* Photography: *Philippe Agostini.* Editor: *Roger Dwyre.* Art Director: *Auguste Capelier.* Music: *Georges Auric.* Sound: *J. Lebreton.*

Cast: Jean Servais (*Tony le Stéphanois*), Carl Mohner (*Jo le Suedois*), Robert Manuel (*Mario*), Perlo Vita played by Jules Dassin under an alias (*Cesar*), Magali Noel (*Viviane*), Marie Sabouret (*Mado*), Janine Darcy (*Louise*), Pierre Grasset (*Louis*), Robert Hossein (*Remi*), Marcel Lupovici (*Pierre*), Dominique Maurin (*Tonio*), Calude Sylvain (*Ida*).

Jules Dassin has made some interesting and influential films. Three of his early movies are important to the history of the gangster film. *The Naked City* (1948), *Night and the City* (1950) and the classic heist film *Rififi* (1955). In its use of actual New York locations to relate a conventional tale of the police's pursuit and capture of a killer, *The Naked City* was seminal in the development of the iconography of the modern gangster film. *Night and the City*, a Langian excursion into a surrealistic city of nightmare and terror, retains its impact,

even today. *Rififi* was one of the first big caper movies and had the interesting effect of making its audiences feel like accomplices to the crime, before visiting retribution on the criminals. Although Dassin, himself, never cared much for it, *Rififi* is one of his most successful films and he got the directorial award for it at Cannes.

The story is divided into two distinct, almost separately constructed parts -- first the planning and execution of a robbery by four men, two Frenchmen and two Italians; second, their fight to the death with a rival gang which is after the loot. The first part is by far the best, consistently exciting and stylish in its account of the coming together of the accomplices, of their respective characters and backgrounds. It is all presented within the French tradition of humanizing criminality. We are invited to sympathize with and be amused by these men. Characterization is astutely balanced; the sour determination of Tony (Jean Servais), the honest good nature of Jo (Carl Mohner) and the friendly good humour of Mario (Robert Manuel). These are real men, real heroes, our sympathies with them rather than the police, and it is significant that their fate is the result of their own mistakes, their own weaknesses, rather than through the strength of their enemies.

The core of the film is the long speechless sequence in which the men dig their way into a large Paris jewellery shop from the apartment above, dismantle the fiendishly sensitive burglar alarm and cut through the back of the safe. This passage is a remarkable piece of technical ingenuity as regards both conception and presentation, and the film's fame rests on this one exceptional set piece.

As previously noted, the second part of the film is the attempt of a rival gang to get the loot away from the four gangsters who pulled the job and is, perhaps, an intentional but none too novel twist on the cops and robbers chase. It is the law of the underworld -- of the jungle -- that brings the criminals to justice, not "society". The film degenerates, and a certain amount of feeling and discrimination are lost. The conclusion is worked out with an inevitability which, while increasing tension and pace, seems naive.

Perhaps we will give the final word to Jules Dassin. In an interview in *Film Culture*, February 1958, he said he considered everything prior to *Celui Que Doit Mourir* (He Who Must Die, 1958), routine. He was asked: "But *Naked City*, *Rififi*, surely they were more than routine?"

Dassin: They were gangster films, detective thrillers. Of course, I tried to individualize the characters. I did the best I could. But I was working within severe limits.

Interviewer: You've probably heard a lot about the theme of nihilism in *Rififi*. Do you have any comments?

Dassin: Look, I've read a lot of inflated criticism about *Rififi*, about its "interior rhythms" and all that. Here's what happened. I was living in Paris. I had a wife and three kids to support. I was having a hard time making ends meet. One day a producer came to me and said "Have you read *Rififi*; *chez les hommes*?" I said, "Yes, I have, and I loved it!" So he said, "Good, we've bought the book and we're going to film it. Report to work Tuesday and you can direct it."

"Well, you can imagine how I felt. I hadn't worked for five years. The first thing I did when he left was to run out and find a copy of the book so I could read it. When I finally did get a copy I couldn't understand it. The patois was too much for me. When I finally got a friend to translate the slang, I found

that the book was unfilmable. Every character was either a pimp or a prostitute. But -- there was one paragraph which mentioned that a jewel robbery had taken place. That set me thinking. I began to work. There was nothing to do but start from scratch. I finished the screenplay in eight days. Except for that one paragraph, the script has very little resemblance to the original. Well, you know the rest. I'm grateful for *Rififi*. But it was a routine assignment.

Routine, maybe, but it is that one paragraph, expanded for filmic purposes, that gives *Rififi* its prominence in the history of film and especially in the thriller genre.

I SOLITI IGNOTI (Big Deal on Madonna Street) 1958 Italy b/w 16 mm 105 mins

Production Company: *Lux/Vides/Cinecitta*. Producer: *Franco Cristaldi*. Director: *Mario Monicelli*. Script: *Age, Scarpelli, Suso Cecchi d'Amico and Mario Monicelli*. Photography: *Gianni Di Venanzo*. Art Director: *Piero Gherardi*. Editor: *Adriana Novelli*. Music: *Piero Umiliani*.

Cast: *Vittorio Gassman (Peppe)*, *Renato Salvatori (Mario)*, *Marcello Mastroianni (Tiberio)*, *Memmo Carotenuto (Cosimo)*, *Toto (Dante)*, *Carla Gravina (Nicoletta)*, *Rossana Rory (Norma)*, *Claudia Cardinale (Carmelina)*, *Carlo Pisacane (Capanelle)*, *Tiberio Murgia (Ferribotte)*.

In Italy, the film's title *I Solti Igoti*, is a newspaper phrase that means "the usual unknown person", used with reference to the commission of a crime. The "big Deal" referred to in the English language title is the contemptated burglary of a smalltime jeweller's safe, and the fellows who conspire to do it try to lay out their plans in the same 'scientific' fashion as did the robbers in *Rififi*. The film is certainly calculated as an out-and-out parody of *Rififi*, which was a big hit in Italy at the time.

Of course, the meticulously organized burglary in *Rififi* is a ripe field for parody and this film joyfully exploits the possibilities. From the command to synchronize watches, when the disgusted leader learns he is the only one with a watch, to the final 'breakthrough', the great coup is a hilarious take-off in which the pace and comic invention rarely falter. Never has crime appeared less likely to pay than in this Italian study of criminal ineptitude.

Director Mario Monicelli controls his variations on the main joke with artfulness, managing always to come up with a surprise or a fresh turn to an inevitable outcome. He maintains a firm hold on the sobriety of his characters in the midst of extreme absurdities. They never suspect their foolishness which rather endears them to us. The performances are uniformly excellent. Vittorio Gassman plays the gang's leader with precisely the right degree of ludicrous, frustrated panache. Young Marcello Mastroianni is an amiable crook whose participation in the deal is hampered by having to mind the baby while his wife is temporarily in jail. Renato Salvatori, the youngster, falls hopelessly and helplessly in love with the guarded sister of another of the conspirators -- Tiberio Murgia -- a vengeful and hot-tempered Sicilian. Carlo Pisacane is the little shrimp who's much more interested in food than the 'job'. Memmo Carotenuto's Cosimo is a memorable study of ferocious ineptitude, bellowing frustrated rage in a voice that grates several layers of sandpaper.