Tuesday next, January 17th: DONBEY AND SON (1917, dir: Maurice Elvey), a British version of the Dickens classic, with Lillian Braithwaite; and MARY PICKFORD - 1908-1933, a compilation of scenes from her films.

Tuesday January 10 1967

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

An Evening with the P.B.I.

In order that these two films (shown in reverse chronological sequence) may be placed in their proper perspective, I'm prefacing these notes with a very short chronology of the gangster film. It is not intended as anything like a complete survey, and dates given are those of the Beginnings of specific cycles; it is not suggested that all film titles cited were made in the same year, though in most cases the date given will cover a span of four or five years at most.

1912: The beginnings of the gangster film: Griffith's "The Musketeers of Pig Alley"; Ince's "Gangsters and the Girl" establishes the basic "undercover man" plot-line of later gangster films; Selig's "The Making of Crooks" investigates the corruption of youth in a way that pre-dates "Public Enemy".

1927: Sternberg's "Underworld" launches the gangster cycle proper, during the heyday of prohibition. Others of note: "The City Gone Wild" (Cruze), "The Hacket" (Milestone), "Walking Back" (Julian) and "He Gangster". Films tend to be slow-paced, over-melodramatic in characterization and often over-sentimental; action has not yet become a key ingredient. This pattern is also repeated in some of the earlier talkie gangster films, such as "The Hacketeer".

1930: The over-rated but nevertheless important "Little Caesar" helps establish the most prolific period of the gangster film. Plot-lines concentrate on the gangster and little Caesar; rather than the policeman; films rapidly acquire a vivid, staccato style of their own; elements of social comment automatically absorbed into scripts; directors like Wellman, LeRoy, Mayo, Hawks, Roland West; stars such as Cagney, Beery, Robinson, Chester Morris. Notable films: "Little Caesar", "Public Enemy", "Scarface", "Bad Company", "Corsair", "Doorway to Hell", "Smart Money". Off-shoots of the cycle include the newspaper melodrama ("The Finger Points") and the prison film ("Criminal Code", "The Big House"). By 1933 however the male is beginning to run out of steam, the gangster film is becoming formulised, and only a couple of years after "Little Caesar" Robinson spoofs the whole genre in "Little Giant".

1935: With the Production Code clean-up, the whole emphasis now shifts to "Crime Does Not Pay" (itself the subject of a series of MGM shorts) and a concentration on the efficiency of the law. Cagney's "G-Men" is the blockbuster of this cycle, with Sam Wood's "Let Us Have It" a notable runner-up. Boys, who will turn more and more to psychological thrillers or law enforcement again kids the genre in Ford's "The Whole Town's Talking". The gangster film now joins the Western in becoming a staple "B" picture commodity, via tight little films like "Show Them No Mercy", "Public Enemy"'s "Wife", "King of the Underworld", "Armored Car", "Illegal Traffic".

1939: Just as the grade-A horror film is revived with "Son of Frankenstein", so does the major gangster film, with the emphasis shifting back to a "good" badman hero, get a revitalising with "Angels With Dirty Faces", "The Roaring 20's" and "Each Dawn I Die". However, the cycle is affected by the war. Gangsters are reformed by patriotism (Bogart in "All Through the Night", Alan Ladd in "Lucky Jordan") or sidetracked by psychology (Robinson in "Key Largo"). The post-war theme of the returning G.I. drifting into crime is exploited to a minor degree in films like Florey's "The Crooked Way" or Cavalcanti's "They Made Me a Fugitive", but the contemporary facts don't support the extended use of this theme. The "B" gangster film tends to soft-pedal spectacular action, and to veer instead towards simpler and even semi-documentary treatments, a in Paramount's J. Edgar Hoover series ("Persons in Hiding", "Queen of the Mob" etc.) of which tonight's "Parole Fixer" is a representative example. "Dillinger" is a profitable low-budget gangster film of the old school, but is not followed-up because of production code problems. Robert Florey's "Roger Touhey, Last of the Gangsters" is cut by almost a third of its original running time. Bogart has come to the fore in this period.

1948: "The Street With No Name", directed by William Keighley ("G-Men") further develops the documentary-treatment so much in vogue due to deRochemont; the crime film and the gangster film now become inter-mingled, and psychological and documentary approaches invade both "A" and "B" - viz "The Killers", "Desert Fury", "Special Agent", "Key Largo". Gradually and apparently finally, the gangster film goes into a definite decline.
Then there is a sudden rebirth with Raoul Walsh's "White Heat", and a second less successful Cagney follow-up "Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye". In England, "No Orchids for Miss Blandish" is little more than a parody of the gangster film with its exaggerated brutality.

1956: "Al Capone", a fantastic boxoffice success, sparks off a whole new series of gangster epics from majors and independents alike. Production code requirements are now relaxed, and the emphasis is now more on brutality and sex. For the most part the films try vainly to emulate "Scarface" via reconstructions of the 20's - "Pretty Boy Floyd", "The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond", "The Purple Mob". Only "Hello Frisco Frisco", a good old-fashioned melodrama with Robinson and Alan Ladd, and "Bay of Pigs" (look at the Mafia) really pay off. Cagney is now virtually retired; Robinson plays the top more than the hood ("Vice Squad", "A Bullet for Joey"); Bogart dies. No new players with their dynamism take their place. Again the cycle dwindles, and it seems unlikely that Warren Beatty, playing in a currently-shooting gangster opus, can do much to revive it!

Apologies for the numerous interesting Bogart films - "The Petrified Forest", "Bullets or Ballots", "High Sierra" etc. - eliminated from this brief listing for the simple reason that none of them really fitted into the periodic cycles that we were trying to compress so drastically.


White admitting that "Parole Fixer" is frankly a "B", with no pretensions to anything more, it is a simple, crisply-scripted and uncluttered tale, that gets right down to its story with good dramatic and cinema scenes. Like most of Florey's films, and you'll know from our past reviews that we have a fondness for his above-average "B"s, even if his few "A"s disappointed - it has style, economy, and pace. A fight scene is particularly well and convincingly staged without any acrobatic stunt stuff, and the early leisurely pace soon becomes quite tense. There aren't too many surprises - it's pretty obvious that the happy FBI man with a charming family isn't long for this world. - and one doesn't altogether buy the friendly (off-screen) image projected for Hoover, any more than one bought such an image of DeMille despite Paramount's efforts in "Smash Boulevard" and other films. But there are some surprises - this must be the only film on record where perennial cringer Byron Foulger emerges with a backbone - and Florey never minds resorting to the oldest of dodges to keep his film nicely on the move. "Let's see if I've got this straight" one character remarks, conveniently cutting some plot action for the audience, and thus avoiding several minutes of expository footage.

"G MEN" (Warner Brothers, 1935) Directed by William Keighley; screenplay by Seton I. Miller; camera: Jack Polito; 9 reels.

With James Cagney, Ann Dorval, Margaret Lindsay, Barton MacLane, Robert Armstrong, Lloyd Nolan, William Harrigan, Regis Toomey, Ed Pawley, Russell Hopton, Noel Madison, Addison Richards, Raymond Hatton, Mary Treen, Adrian Morris, Tom Wilson, Harold Huber, Edwin Maxwell, Brooks Benedict, Emmet Vogan, Ward Bond, Johnathan Hale, James Flavin, Wheeler Oakman, Frank Shannon, Bill Elliott, and in the added prologue, David Brian, Douglas Kennedy.

What does one really need to say about "G-Men"? Hardly an important film or a serious comment as was "The Public Enemy", dated in its limited documentary aspects, it's just a grand outsized "show" - to the gangster film what "The Spoilers" is to the Western. The action is slammed over in blistering style - machine-gun battles, car chases (and crashes!), fistscuffs, the poor old First National Bank being held up yet again; the dialogue crackles with bantering wisecracks, and when all else fails they throw in chorus girls and song numbers. Barton MacLane never speaks when a shout will suffice, the hoods all wear black suits and look unexplainably oily, evil and predominantly Italian, while the FBI men are all cheerful serious, and bumbling over with integrity. If ever there was a clearly-defined "Good Guys vs Bad Guys" movie this is it - and more power to it. It has a built-in head of steam from all departments - acting, direction, writing, editing - that has all but disappeared from the cinema today, Stanley Kubrick excepted. It's a perennial to be enjoyed every few years, so we make no apologies for the revival of a well-known film.

- Wm. K. Everson -