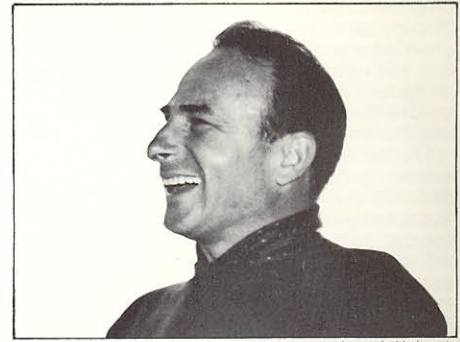


The one-take Hampton Robbery sequence in *Gun Crazy*, top to bottom, marked by frame numbers from the beginning of the sequence: "They know they are special people and will be given by the American ethic the special right to act out their

THREE ARTICLES, AN INTERVIEW AND FILMOGRAPHY

Joseph H. Lewis



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by Paul Schrader

When Peter Bogdanovich asked me if *Cinema* would like to publish part of his lengthy interview with Joseph H. Lewis, I was intrigued. I was a passionate admirer of *Gun Crazy*, regarding it as one of the best American films ever made, but had seen few of Lewis' other films. Unreliable sources had told me there were several more nuggets in the Lewis mine, and I welcomed the chance to check for myself. Also I thought it would be nice if *Cinema* was the first magazine to take up Andrew Sarris' 1962 challenge (which he retracted the following year): "If some bright new film critic should awaken the world to the merits of Joseph Lewis in the near future, we will have to scramble back to his 1940 record: *Two-Fisted Rangers*, *Blazing Six-Shooters*, *Texas Stagecoach*, *The Man from Tumbleweeds*, *Boys of the City*, *Return of Wild Bill* and *That Gang of Mine*. Admittedly, in this direction lies madness."

Accepting Bogdanovich's offer, *Cinema* began to borrow and rent as many Lewis films as we could find. In the end we were able to secure twelve films, representing the various stages of his career. As the Lewis films began to unroll, however, my enthusiasm began to wane. Sure the acting was terrible, the production values nil, the scripts execrable, but the direction was pretty lousy too. There we sat, three glum-faced film critics watching *The Boss of Hangtown Mesa*, saying, "It can't really be this bad, can it?"

Well it was, and so were a good many other Lewis films. Of all the Lewis films, excepting *Gun Crazy*, I found only *The Big Combo* and *Undercover Man* to have any real stature, and this primarily in comparison with other Lewis films. Next to Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953), *The Big Combo* (1955) looks definitely secondary, as does *Undercover Man* (1949) next to Mann's *T-Men* (1947). *My Name is Julia Ross* and *So Dark the Night* both have very intriguing, baroque qualities, but you have to overlook a great deal to notice them. And the real dogs—those films so routinely directed they could have been shot by the gopher boy—run throughout Lewis' career: from the aforementioned *Boss of Hangtown Mesa* (1942) to *The Return of October* (1949) to *Desperate Search* (1952).

All of which brings us back to *Gun Crazy*, a shockingly brilliant film which stands out from the rest of the Lewis oeuvre like a pair of Jax slacks (as my publisher would be wont to say) at a Thrifty Mart. I don't know exactly how to explain it. Someone suggested that *Gun Crazy's* success could be in part due to the producers, the King brothers, but the superlative qualities of *Gun Crazy* are precisely those which only the director can give: a combined sense of pacing, élan, and dynamic composition. These elements are noticeable in other Lewis films (particularly *The Big Combo*), but not to the extent which could explain the excellence of *Gun Crazy*. From my vantage point, it seems that Lewis, when faced with a certain combination of actors, producers, script, budget and subject matter, was able to direct a film which in retrospect seems out of his class. Whether this makes Lewis a latent genius or a fluke, I

don't know. Neither do I know what it makes of the auteur theory, or any other schemes of film authorship.

Nevertheless, *Gun Crazy* certainly can stand alone. It has a precision, an intelligence, a mania for violence which places it in the forefront of American films. *Gun Crazy* (1950) is an early variation of the Bonnie and Clyde theme, although the Bonnie, Peggy Cummins, also stands in the forties Black Widow tradition. John Dall, a shy, winsome young man who for some unknown reason "just loves guns," encounters an equally attractive young woman who also loves guns, but for a definite reason: kicks and money. Although they begin as innocent honeymooners they are gradually led to crime and, inexorably, to death. Although Dall never kills anyone in his career of crime, he finally is compelled to shoot his Bonnie as the police close in on them in a foggy swamp.

There are three scenes in *Gun Crazy* which demonstrate its complexity and style, and any of these scenes certainly can stand shoulder to shoulder with those made by any director in any country.

1. *The Meeting at the Carnival*. Dall, just out of the army, is taken by his two childhood buddies to a local carnival where they attend a sharpshooting sideshow. Peggy Cummins, dressed in an Annie Oakley outfit, is the sharpshooter, and Dall, entranced, accepts the barker's challenge to match her in a shooting contest. As Dall and Cummins meet on stage their instant, fatal attraction for each other is so immediate and tangible that it can sustain their relationship throughout the film. Each loves guns, action, sex; they are the personification of American youth, and the very way they move about suggests they know and love what they are and represent.

Lewis delicately choreographs this ballet of sex and innuendo. Teasing and smirking, Dall and Cummins revolve about each other, like two magnets irresistibly attracted but afraid to get too close. The cutting has a straightforward, stately precision. Lewis inserts no obvious camera angles or tricks (as he liked to do on other occasions), but lets the character chemistry interact within the fixed frame. The very camera restraint heightens the sexual tension; everything seems right on the verge of happening outside the characters, when it is actually happening inside the characters. Lewis has staged and shot the first meeting so delicately that the viewer gives these two psychopaths his immediate support at this crucial juncture. The viewer likes what these two people represent—youth, sex, action—but, more importantly, he likes how they act toward each other. Their demeanor implies a whole set of complex interrelations: Dall and Cummins are irresistibly attracted, yet are perfectly aware of what they are doing; they know they are special people, and will be given by the American ethic the special right to act out their symbolic fantasies.

2. *The Armour Robbery*. The Armour meat-packing plant robbery sequence is an example of what Lewis can do when he decides to move the camera and speed-up



the editing. This meticulously created 10 minute sequence is a textbook lesson in fast-paced editing and camerawork.

The Armour sequence involves a great deal of preparation and staging. Dall and Cummins both get jobs in different sections of the meat-packing plant, and the immense plant involves them in at least six different interior locations. Lewis quickly moves through all this information in a straight plot-oriented manner. The entire physical plant is laid out room by room without the viewer's being fully aware of it, so that when the action occurs there is never any doubt where Dall and Cummins are and are going.

The action hits quickly and with frenzy: suddenly Dall and Cummins are dashing pell-mell out of the vault, through the long accounting office, down a turning stairwell, through the chilled meat storage room, into the deserted package area, out onto the docking platform, and away in their car.

Lewis captures the blind craziness, the sense-numbing fear, and sheer exhilaration of crime. Dall and Cummins' cool, collected escape plan goes awry and they are forced to escape through an unplanned route. Running wildly down a corridor, they find it is a dead end and must turn around. Alarms ringing and police chasing them, Dall drops the sack of money and Cummins slips down the stairs.

Lewis has established such baroque, beautifully lit backgrounds that when Dall and Cummins charge high-speed through them the image never loses its depth. They are not only running from point A to point B, but they are zooming in and out of a complex, tension-filled physical environment. And it is precisely this physical complexity which lends the mind-boggling frenzy to their escape.

3. *The Hampton Robbery*. If the Armour robbery captures the mind-numbing frenzy of crime, the Hampton Savings and Loan robbery heist is the four minute one-take sequence Lewis speaks of at length in the Bogdanovich interview. Lewis mounted a camera in the rear of a limousine and watched as a detached back-seat observer as Dall and Cummins drive into Hampton, park, rob the Savings and Loan, and drive off.

Dall and Cummins drive slowly into Hampton, continually chattering: does everything look alright? Will they find a parking place? Do you know the plan? What if something goes wrong? They are both almost sick with suspense and fear, yet neither dares admit it.

Neither does the camera admit it. It sits out the entire robbery like an helpless accomplice forced to watch. The viewer is not thrown into the action, but purposefully held back. As nothing happens, tension builds; the fate of the robbery is being decided just outside one's view, and one occasionally catches a quick glimpse of it. Now being caught up in frenzy, but having to wait—and wait. Slowly, the stomach grinds like the idling motor.

As in the Armour robbery, the viewer is caught up in the tide of events he cannot control. In one case Lewis boggles the mind and offsets one's balance, in the other he gnaws at the stomach and taunts one's nerves. In both cases it is action which is in the driver's seat, and the viewer and the character who must follow it.

In *Gun Crazy* Lewis does not submit action to psychology. The action has a life of its own, and the characters often do not have time to fully contemplate or understand why they are its victims. Unlike the other Bonnie and Clyde films (*You Only Live Once*, *They Live by Night*, *Bonnie and Clyde*—great films all), *Gun Crazy* is not a story of determinism, doomed love or poetic nostalgia. It is an exhilarating tribute to reckless love and non-stop action. There are no excuses given for the gun craziness—it is just crazy. Dall, although intelligent, is never able to understand why he is propelled toward violence and crime at such a dizzying rate. In no film has the American mania for youth, action, sex and crime been so immediately portrayed. *Gun Crazy* does not offer much reflection or perspective, but, unlike anything else, it puts you in the driver's seat. ★



Peggy Cummins and John Dall in *Gun Crazy*. Top: the meeting at the carnival. Middle: the Armour robbery. Bottom: death in the marsh. "In no film has the American mania for youth, action, sex and crime been so immediately portrayed. There are no excuses given for the gun craziness—it is just crazy."

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